

AIMARD'S

INDIAN

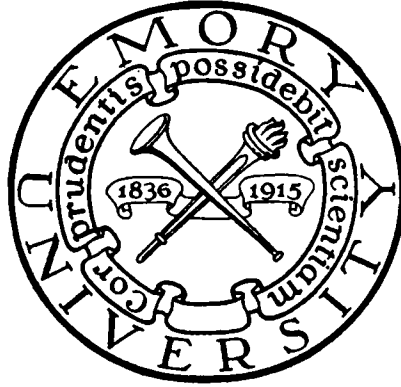
TALES

❧ FIRST SERIES ❧

EDITED BY PERCY B. ST JOHN



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THE
TRAPPERS OF ARKANSAS

A Narrative

BY

GUSTAVE AIMARD

AUTHOR OF "BORDER RIFLES," "FREEBOOTERS," "WHITE SCALPER," ETC.

REVISED AND EDITED BY PERCY B. ST. JOHN

LONDON

JOHN AND ROBERT MAXWELL
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AND

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NOTICE.

GUSTAVE AIMARD was the adopted son of one of the most powerful Indian tribes, with whom he lived for more than fifteen years in the heart of the Prairies, sharing their dangers and their combats, and accompanying them everywhere, rifle in one hand and tomahawk in the other. In turn squatter, hunter, trapper, warrior, and miner, GUSTAVE AIMARD has traversed America from the highest peaks of the Cordilleras to the ocean shores, living from hand to mouth, happy for the day, careless of the morrow. Hence it is that GUSTAVE AIMARD only describes his own life. The Indians of whom he speaks he has known—the manners he depicts are his own.

NOTICE

THE present volume of GUSTAVE AIMARD'S works is succeeded by the "Border Rifles," the "Freebooters," and the "White Scaiper." These complete the first series of his adventures: and, in exciting scenes and perilous exploits, they possess surpassing interest.

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THE TRAPPERS OF ARKANSAS

CHAPTER I.

HERMOSILLO.

ON the day in which this narrative commences, that is to say, the 17th January 1817, between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, a time when the ordinary population are taking their siesta in the most retired apartments of their dwellings, the city of Hermosillo, the capital of Sonora, in New Mexico, generally so quiet, presented an unusual aspect.

This city, built upon a plateau which sinks towards the north, in a gentle declivity to the sea, shelters itself against a hill named El Cerro de la Campana (Mountain of the Bell), whose summit is crowned with enormous blocks of stone, which, when struck, render a clear metallic sound.

In other respects, like its other American sisters, this ciudad is dirty, built of pisé-bricks, and presents to the astonished eyes of the traveller a mixture of ruins, negligence, and desolation which saddens the soul.

A vast number of leperos, gambusinos, contrabandists, and, above all, of rateros, were crowded together, with cries, menaces, and wild howlings, in the Calle del Rosario (Street of the Rosary). A few Spanish soldiers—at that period Mexico had not shaken off the yoke of the mother-country—were endeavouring in vain to re-establish order, by striking heavily, with the shafts of their lances, all individuals who came in their way.

But the tumult, far from diminishing, rapidly increased; the Hiaquis Indians, in particular, yelled and gesticulated in a frightful manner.

The windows of the houses were filled by men and women, who, with looks directed towards the Cerro de la Campana, from the foot of which arose thick clouds of smoke in large volumes towards the heavens, seemed to be in expectation of some extraordinary event.

Suddenly loud cries were heard; the crowd divided into two, every one throwing himself on one side or the other, with marks of the greatest terror; while a young man, or rather a boy, for he was scarcely sixteen, appeared, borne along like a whirlwind by the furious gallop of a half-wild horse.

"Stop him!" cried some.

"Lasso him!" shouted others.

"*Valga me Dios!*" the women murmured, crossing themselves. "It is the demon himself."

But everyone got out of his way as quickly as he could; the bold boy continued his rapid course, with a jeering smile upon his lips, his face inflamed, his eye sparkling, and distributing, right and left, smart blows with his *chicote* on all who ventured too near him, or whose unfortunate destiny prevented them from getting out of his way as fast as they would have wished.

"Eh! eh! *Caspita!*" said a *vaquero* with a stupid countenance and athletic limbs, as the boy jostled him. "Devil take the madman, he nearly knocked me down! Eh! but," he added, staring at the young man, "if I mistake not, that is Rafaël, my neighbour's son! Wait a moment, *picaro!*"

While saying this between his teeth, the *vaquero* unrolled the lasso which he wore fastened to his belt, and ran in the direction of the horseman.

"Bravo, bravo!" cried the crowd.

"Don't miss him, Cornejo," some *vaqueros* encouragingly shouted, clapping their hands.

Cornejo, the name of this interesting personage, already gained insensibly upon the boy.

Warned by the cries of the spectators, the horseman turned his head and saw the *vaquero*.

A livid paleness covered his countenance; he felt that he was lost.

"Let me escape, Cornejo," he cried.

"No!" the men howled; "lasso him! lasso him!"

The populace took great interest in this man-hunt; they feared to find themselves cheated of a spectacle which gave them much satisfaction.

"Surrender," the giant replied; "or else, I warn you, I will lasso you like a cibolo."

"I will not surrender," the boy said resolutely.

The two speakers still held on their way, the one on foot, the other on horseback, while the crowd followed, howling with pleasure.

"Leave me, I say," the boy cried, "or I swear by the blessed souls of purgatory, that evil will befall you!"

The *vaquero* sneered, and whirled his lasso round his head.

"Be warned, Rafaël," he said; "for the last time, will you surrender?"

"No! a thousand times no!" the boy cried, passionately.

"By the grace of God, then!" said the *vaquero*.

The lasso whizzed and flew through the air.

But a strange thing happened at the same moment.

Rafaël stopped his horse short, as if it had been changed into a block of granite; and, springing from the saddle, he bounded like a tiger upon the giant, whom the shock bore down upon the sand; and before anybody could oppose him, he plunged the knife, which all Mexicans wear in their belts, into his throat.

A long stream of blood spurted into the face of the boy, the *vaquero* writhed for a few seconds, and then remained motionless. He was dead!

The crowd uttered a cry of horror and fear.

Quick as lightning, the boy had regained his saddle, and continued his desperate course, brandishing his knife, and laughing with the grin of a demon.

When, the first moment of stupor having passed, the people resumed the pursuit, he had disappeared. No one could tell which way he had gone.

As is always the case under such circumstances, the *juez de letras* (criminal judge), accompanied by a crowd of tattered *alguazils*, arrived on the spot where the murder had been committed when it was too late.

The *juez de letras*, Don Inigo Tormentos d'Albaceyte, was a man of fifty years of

age, short and stout, with an apoplectic face, who took snuff out of a gold box set with diamonds, and concealed under an apparent *bonhomie* a profound avarice backed by excessive cunning and a coolness which nothing could move.

Contrary to what might have been expected, the worthy magistrate did not appear in the least disconcerted by the flight of the assassin; he shook his head two or three times, cast a glance round the crowd, and said—

"Poor Cornejo!" stuffing his nose philosophically with snuff: "this was sure to happen to him some day or other."

"Yes," said a lepero, "he was neatly killed!"

"That is what I was thinking," the judge replied; "he who gave this blow knew what he was about."

"Humph!" the lepero replied, with a shrug of his shoulders, "he is a boy."

"Bah!" the judge said, with feigned astonishment, "you do not say so; a boy!"

"Little more," the lepero added, proud of being listened to; "it was Rafaël, Don Ramon's son."

"Ah! ah! ah!" the judge said, with secret satisfaction. "But no," he went on, "that is not possible; Rafaël is but sixteen at most; he would never have been so foolish as to quarrel with Cornejo, who could have crushed him in his grasp."

"And yet it is as I tell your excellency—we all saw it. Rafaël had been playing at *monte*, at Don Aguilar's, and it appears that luck was not favourable to him; he lost all the money he had; he then flew into a rage, and to avenge himself, set fire to the house."

"Caspita!" said the judge.

"It was just as I have the honour to tell your excellency; look, the smoke may yet be seen, though the house is reduced to ashes."

"Well, it seems so," the judge said, turning his eyes to the point indicated. "And, then——"

"Then," the other continued, "he naturally wished to escape. Cornejo endeavoured to stop him."

"He was right!"

"Well, he was wrong; since Rafaël killed him!"

"That's true! that's true!" said the judge; "but be satisfied, my good people, justice will avenge him."

This promise was received by all present with a smile of doubt.

The magistrate, without concerning himself about the impression produced by his words, ordered his acolytes, who had already examined and plundered the defunct, to take the body away, and transport it to the porch of the nearest church, and then returned to his residence, rubbing his hands with a satisfied air.

The judge put on a travelling dress, placed a brace of pistols in his belt, fastened a long sword to his side, and, after taking a light dinner, went out.

Ten alguazils, armed to the teeth, and mounted on strong horses, waited for him at the door; a domestic held the bridle of a magnificent black horse, which pawed the ground and champed the bit impatiently. Don Inigo leaped into the saddle, headed his men, and the troop went off at a gentle trot.

"Eh! eh!" said the curious, who were watching. "The Juez Albacete is going to Don Ramon Garillas's; we shall hear some news to-morrow."

"Caspita!" others replied; "his picaro of a son has fairly earned the rope that is to hang him!"

"Humph!" said a lepero; "that would be unfortunate! the lad promises so well! By my word, the *cuchillada* he gave Cornejo was magnificent."

Meanwhile, the judge continued his journey, gravely returning all the salutations with which he was greeted on his way. He was soon in the country.

"Are the arms all loaded?" he asked.

"Yes, excellency," the chief of the alguazils replied.

"That's well. To the hacienda of Don Ramon Garillas, then; and at a smart pace; we must endeavour to get there before night fall."

CHAPTER II.

THE HACIENDA DEL MILAGRO.

THE environs of Hermosillo are a mere desert; while the road which leads from that city to the Hacienda del Milagro is one of the dullest possible.

Nothing is to be seen but iron-wood, gum, and Peru trees, with red and spicy clusters, nopals, and cactuses, the only trees that can possibly grow in a soil calcined by the incandescent rays of a perpendicular sun.

When, however, the traveller has crossed six leagues of this burning solitude, the eye reposes with delight upon a splendid oasis, which appears all at once to rise from the bosom of the sands.

This Eden is the Hacienda del Milagro.

At the time our history took place, this hacienda, one of the richest and largest in the province, was composed of a two-storied house, built of *tapia* and *adobes*, with a terrace-roof of reeds, covered with beaten earth.

Access to the hacienda was gained by passing through an immense court, the entrance of which, shaped like an arched portico, was furnished with strong folding gates, and a postern on one side. Four chambers completed the front; the windows had gratings of gilded iron, and shutters inside; the windows had panes of glass, an almost unheard-of luxury at that time; on the four sides of the court, or patio, were the apartments for the peons and children, &c.

The ground-floor of the principal house was composed of three apartments; a kind of grand vestibule furnished with antique fauteuils and couches covered with stamped Cordovan leather, with a large nopal table and some stools; upon the walls hung, in gilded frames, several full-length portraits, representing members of the family; while the beams of the ceiling were decorated with a profusion of carvings.

Two folding doors opened into the saloon; the side in front of the patio being raised about a foot above the rest of the floor, and covered by a carpet, and contained a row of curiously-carved low stools ornamented with crimson velvet, and with cushions for the feet; there was also a little square table, eighteen inches high, serving as a work-table. This portion of the saloon is reserved for the ladies, who there sit cross-legged, in the Moorish fashion; on the other side of the saloon were chairs covered with the same stuff as the stools and the cushions. Facing the entrance of the saloon was the principal bed-chamber, with an alcove at the back of a *daïs*, upon which stood a bed of ceremony, ornamented with an infinity of gildings and brocade curtains, with tassels and fringes of gold and silver; the sheets and pillow-cases were of the most beautiful linen, edged with wide lace.

Behind the principal wing was a second patio, in which were the kitchens and the corral; beyond this court was an immense garden, surrounded by walls, and more than a hundred perches in length, laid out in the English fashion, and containing the most remarkable exotic plants and trees.

It was holiday time at the hacienda.

It was the period of the slaughtering of cattle. The peons had formed, at a few paces from the hacienda, an enclosure, in which, after driving the beasts, they separated the lean from the fat, which they drove out, one by one, from the enclosure.

A vaquero, armed with a sharp instrument in the form of a crescent, furnished with points placed at the distance of a foot apart, and who was concealed behind the door of the enclosure, cut the ham-strings of the poor beasts as they passed before him.

If by chance he missed a stroke, which he rarely did, a second vaquero, mounted on horseback, galloped after the animal, threw the lasso, and held it till the first had succeeded in cutting its ham-strings.

Carelessly leaning against the portico of the hacienda, a man of about forty years of age, clothed in the rich costume of a gentleman farmer, his shoulders covered by a zarapé of brilliant colours, and his head protected from the rays of the setting sun by a fine hat of Panama straw, worth at least five hundred piastres, seemed to be presiding over this scene while enjoying a husk cigarette.

He was a gentleman of lofty bearing, slightly built, but perfectly well-proportioned, his features, well-defined with firm and marked lines, denoted loyalty, courage, and, above all, an inflexible will. His large black eyes, shaded by thick eyebrows, were indescribably mild; but when any contradictory chance spread a red glow over his embrowned complexion, his glance assumed a fixity and depth which few could support, and which made even the bravest hesitate and tremble.

His small hands and feet, and more than all, the aristocratic stamp impressed upon his person, denoted, at the first glance, that this man was of pure and noble Castilian race.

In fact, this personage was Don Ramon Garillas de Saavedra, the owner of the hacienda.

Don Ramon was descended from a Spanish family, the head of which had been one of the principal lieutenants of Cortez, and had settled in Mexico after the miraculous conquest of that able adventurer.

Enjoying a princely fortune, but ignored by the Spanish authorities, on account of his marriage with a woman of mixed Aztec blood, he had given himself up entirely to the cultivation of his land, and the amelioration of his vast domains.

After seventeen years of marriage, he found himself at the head of a large family, composed of six boys and three girls, in all nine children, of whom Rafaël was the eldest.

The marriage of Don Ramon and Dona Jesuita had been merely a marriage of convenience, contracted solely with a view to consolidating their mutual fortunes, but, notwithstanding, had rendered both comparatively happy; we say comparatively, because, as the girl only left her convent to be married, no love had ever existed between them, but its place has been almost as well occupied by a tender and sincere affection.

Dona Jesuita passed her time in the cares necessitated by her children, surrounded by her Indian women. On his side, her husband, completely absorbed by the duties of his life as a gentleman farmer, was almost always with his vaqueros, his peons, and his huntsmen, only seeing his wife for a few minutes at the hours of meals, and sometimes remaining months together absent in hunting excursions on the banks of the Rio Gila.

Nevertheless, whether absent or present, Don Ramon took the greatest care that nothing should be wanting for his wife's comfort; and in order that her least caprices might be satisfied, he spared neither money nor trouble to procure her all she appeared to desire.

Dona Jesuita was endowed with extraordinary beauty and angelic temper; she appeared to have accepted, if not with joy, at least without any great regret, the life to which her husband had obliged her to submit; but in the depth of her large black languishing eye, in the paleness of her countenance, and, above all, in the shade of sadness which continually obscured her beautiful white brow, it was easy to divine that an ardent soul abode within that seductive statue, and that the heart, which knew not itself, had turned all its feelings upon her children, whom she adored with all the virginal strength of maternal love, the most beautiful and holy of all.

As for Don Ramon, always kind and gentle to his wife, whom he had never taken the pains to study, he had a right to believe her the happiest creature in the world, which, in fact, she became as soon as God made her a mother.

It was some minutes after sunset; the sky, by degrees, lost its purple tint, and grew rapidly darker; a few stars began to sparkle in the heavens, and the evening wind arose with a force that indicated the approach of one of those terrible storms which so often burst over these regions.

The mayoral, after having caused the rest of the ganado to be carefully shut up in the enclosure, assembled the men, and all directed their steps towards the hacienda, where the supper-bell announced to them that the hour of rest was come.

As the major-domo passed the last, with a bow, before his master, the latter asked him:

"Well, Eusebio, how many heads do we count?"

"Four hundred and fifty, my master," replied the mayoral, a tall, thin, wizened man, with a gray head, and a countenance tanned like a piece of leather, stopping his horse and taking off his hat; "that is to say, seventy-five head more than last year. Our neighbours the jaguars and the Apaches have not done us any great damage this season."

"Thanks to you, Nô Eusebio," Don Ramon replied; "your vigilance has been great; I must find means to recompense you for it."

"My best recompense is your lordship's kind words," the mayoral, whose rough visage was lit up by a smile of satisfaction, replied. "Ought I not to watch over everything that belongs to you with the same zeal as if it were my own?"

"Thanks," the gentleman remarked, warmly shaking his servant's hand. "I know how truly you are devoted to me."

"For life and death! My mother nourished you with her milk; I belong to you and your family."

"Come, come, Nô Eusebio," the haciennero said, gaily; "supper is ready; the senora is by this time at table; we must not keep her waiting."

Upon this, both entered the patio, and Nô Eusebio, as Don Ramon had named him, prepared, as was his custom every evening, to close the gates.

Meanwhile, Don Ramon entered the dining-hall, where all the vaqueros and peons were assembled.

This hall was furnished with an immense table, which occupied the entire centre; around this table there were wooden forms covered with leather, and two carved arm-chairs, intended for Don Ramon and the senora. Here and there, on the whitewashed walls, grinned the heads of jaguars, buffaloes, and elks, killed in the chase by the haciennero.

The table was abundantly supplied with lahua, or thick soup made of the flour of maize boiled with meat, with puchero, or olla podrida, and with pepian; at regular distances there were bottles of mezcál, and decanters of water.

At a sign from the haciennero the repast commenced; just then the storm broke forth with fury.

The rain fell in torrents; vivid flashes of lightning dimmed the lights, preceding awful claps of thunder.

Towards the end of the repast, the hurricane acquired such violence, that the tumult of the conspiring elements drowned the hum of conversation.

The thunder-peals burst with frightful force, a whirlwind filled the hall, after dashing in a window, and extinguished all the lights; the assembly crossed themselves with terror.

At that moment, the bell placed at the gate of the hacienda resounded with a convulsive noise, and a voice cried twice distinctly,—

“Help! help!”

“Sangre de Cristo!” Don Ramon cried, as he rushed out of the hall, “somebody is being murdered.”

Two shots were heard almost together, a cry of agony rung through the air, and all relapsed into sinister silence.

All at once, a pale flash of lightning furrowed the obscurity, the thunder burst with a horrible crash, and Don Ramon reappeared, bearing a fainting man.

The stranger was placed in a seat, and all crowded round him; there was nothing extraordinary in the appearance of this man, and yet, on perceiving him, Rafaël the eldest son of Don Ramon, could not repress a gesture of terror, and his face became lividly pale.

“Oh!” he murmured, “it is the juez de letras.”

It was, indeed, the worthy judge, whom we saw leave Hermosillo with such brilliant equipage.

His long hair, soaked with rain, fell upon his breast, his clothes were in disorder, spotted with blood, and torn in many places.

His right hand clutched the stock of a pistol.

Don Ramon had likewise recognised the juez de letras, and had unconsciously darted a glance at his son, which the latter could not endure.

Thanks to the intelligent care that was bestowed upon him by Dona Jesuita and her women, the man breathed a deep sigh, opened his haggard eyes, which he rolled round upon the assembly, without at first seeing anything, and by degrees recovered his senses.

All at once a deep flush covered his brow, which had been so pale a minute before, and his eye sparkled. Fixing a look upon Don Rafaël which nailed him to the floor, a prey to invincible terror, he rose with difficulty, and advancing towards the young man, who saw his approach without daring to avoid him, he placed his hand roughly on his shoulder, and turning towards the peons, who were terrified at this strange scene, of which they comprehended nothing, said solemnly,—

“I, Don Inigo Tormentos d’Albaceyte, juez de letras of the city of Hermosillo, arrest this man, accused of assassination, in the king’s name!”

“Mercy!” cried Rafaël, falling on his knees.

“Woe is me!” the poor mother exclaimed, as she sank back fainting in her chair.

CHAPTER III.

THE SENTENCE.

On the morrow the sunrise was glorious. The storm of the night had completely cleared the sky, which was now of a deep blue; the birds warbled gaily, concealed beneath the leaves, and all nature seemed to have resumed its festive air.

The bell sounded joyously at the Hacienda del Milagro; the peons began to dis-

perse in all directions, some leading horses to the pasturage, others driving cattle to the artificial prairies, others again wending their way to the fields, whilst the rest were employed in the patio in milking the cows and repairing the damages done by the hurricane.

The only traces left of the tempest of the preceding night were two magnificent jaguars stretched dead before the gate of the hacienda, not far from the carcass of a half-devoured horse.

Eusebio, who was walking about in the patio, overlooking the occupations of all, ordered the rich trappings of the horse to be taken off and cleaned, and the jaguars to be skinned.

Nô Eusebio was, however, very uneasy; Don Ramon, generally the first person stirring in the hacienda, had not yet appeared.

On the preceding evening, after the terrible accusation brought by the juez de letras against the eldest son of the hacendero, the latter had ordered his servants to retire, and after having himself, in spite of the tears and prayers of his wife, firmly bound his son, he led Don Inigo d'Albaceyte into a retired apartment of the hacienda, where they both remained till a far advanced hour of the night.

What passed in that interview, in which the fate of Don Rafaël was decided, nobody knew.

Then, after having conducted Don Inigo to a chamber he had had prepared for him, and having wished him good night, Don Ramon proceeded to rejoin his son, with whom the poor mother was still weeping: without pronouncing a word, he took the boy in his arms, and carried him into his bed-room, where he laid him on the ground near his bed; then the hacendero closed and locked the door, went to bed, with two pistols under his pillow. The night passed away thus, the father and son staring wildly at each other, and the poor mother on her knees on the sill of that chamber, which she was forbidden to enter, weeping silently for her first-born, who, as she had a terrible presentiment, was about to be taken from her for ever.

"Hum!" the mayoral murmured to himself, biting the end of his extinguished cigarette, "what will be the end of all this? Don Ramon is not a man to pardon, he will not compromise his honour. Will he give up his son to justice! Oh no! but, in that case, what will he do?"

The worthy mayoral had arrived at this point in his reflections, when Don Inigo d'Albaceyte and Don Ramon appeared in the patio.

The countenances of the two men were stern; that of the hacendero, in particular, was dark as night.

"Nô Eusebio," Don Ramon said in a sharp tone, "have a horse saddled, and prepare an escort of four men to conduct this cavalier to Hermosillo."

The mayoral bowed respectfully, and immediately gave the necessary orders.

"I thank you a thousand times," continued Don Ramon, addressing the judge; "you have saved the honour of my house."

"Do not be so grateful, senor," Don Inigo replied; "I swear to you that when I left the city yesterday, I had no intention of making myself agreeable to you."

The hacendero only replied by a gesture.

"Put yourself in my place; I am criminal judge above everything; a man is murdered—a worthless fellow, I admit—but a man, although of the worst kind; the assassin is known, he traverses the city at full gallop, in open daylight, in the sight of everybody, with incredible effrontery. What could I do?—set off in pursuit of him. I did not hesitate."

"That is true," Don Ramon murmured.

"And bad indeed have been the consequences to me. The cowards who accompanied me abandoned me in the height of the storm, and took shelter I know not where; and then, to crown my troubles, two jaguars, magnificent animals, by-the-

bye, rushed in pursuit of me; they pressed me so hard that I came and fell at your door like a log. It is true I killed one, but the other was very nearly snapping me up, when you came to my assistance. Could I, after that, arrest the son of the man who had saved my life at the peril of his own? That would have been acting with the blackest ingratitude."

"Thanks, once more."

"No thanks; we are quits. I say nothing of some thousands of piastres you have given me; they will serve to stop the mouths of my lynxes. Only, let me beg of you, keep a sharp eye upon your son; if he should fall a second time into my hands, I could not save him."

"Be at ease, in that respect, Don Inigo; my son will never fall into your hands again."

The haciennero pronounced these words in so solemn and melancholy a tone, that the judge started at hearing them, and turned round saying,—

"Take care what you are about to do!"

"Fear nothing," replied Don Ramon; "only, as I am not willing that my son should ascend a scaffold, and drag my name in the mud, I must prevent him."

At that moment the horse was led out, and the juez de letras mounted.

"Well, adieu, Don Ramon," he said in an indulgent voice; "be prudent, this young man may still reform; he is hot blooded, that is all."

"Adieu, Don Inigo d'Albaceyte," the haciennero replied, in a dry tone that admitted of no reply.

The judge shook his head, and clapping spurs to his horse, he set off at full trot, followed by his escort.

The haciennero looked after him, as long as he could see him, and then re-entered the house.

"Eusebio," he said to the mayoral, "ring the bell to call together all the servants of the hacienda."

The mayoral, after looking at his master with astonishment, hastened to execute the order.

At the sound of the bell, the men employed on the farm ran in in haste, not knowing to what cause they should attribute this extraordinary summons.

They were soon all collected together in the great hall. The completest silence reigned among them. A secret pang pressed on their hearts,—they had the presentiment of a terrible event.

After a few minutes of delay, Dona Jesuita entered, surrounded by her children, with the exception of Rafaël, and proceeded to take her place upon a platform at one end of the hall.

Her countenance was pale, and her eyes indicated that she had been weeping.

Don Ramon now appeared. He was clothed in a complete suit of black velvet without lace; a heavy gold chain hung round his neck, a broad-leaved hat of black felt, with an eagle's feather, covered his head, a long sword, with a hilt of bronzed steel, hung by his side.

His brow was heavily marked with wrinkles, his eyebrows were closely knitted above his black eyes, which appeared to dart lightning.

A shudder of terror pervaded the assembly—Don Ramon had put on the robe of judge.

Justice was then about to be done; upon whom?

When Don Ramon had taken his place on the right hand of his wife, he made a sign.

The mayoral went out, and returned a minute after, followed by Rafaël.

With his eyes cast down, and a pale face, he placed himself before his father, whom he saluted respectfully.

At the period of which we are writing, in countries remote from towns and

exposed to the continual incursions of Indians, the heads of families preserved that patriarchal authority which the efforts of our civilization have a tendency to lessen and, at length, to destroy. A father was sovereign in his own house, his judgments were without appeal, and executed without murmurs or resistance.

The people of the farm had long been acquainted with the firm character and implacable will of their master; they knew that he never pardoned, that his honour was dearer to him than life; it was then with a sense of undefinable fear that they prepared to witness the terrible drama which was about to ensue between the father and the son.

Don Ramon rose, cast a dark glance round upon the assembly, and threw his hat at his feet:

"Listen all," he said in a sharp but most distinct voice; "I am of an old Christian race, whose ancestors were never dishonoured; honour has always in my house been considered as the first of earthly goods; that honour which my ancestors transmitted to me intact, and which I have endeavoured to preserve pure, my first-born son, heir to my name, has sullied by an indelible stain. Yesterday, at Hermosillo, after a tavern quarrel, he set fire to a house, at the risk of burning down the whole city, and when a man endeavoured to prevent his escape, he killed him with a poniard-stroke. What can be thought of a boy who, at so tender an age, acts like a wild beast? Justice must be done, and, by God's help, I will do it."

Don Ramon here crossed his arms upon his breast, and appeared to reflect.

No one dared say a word; all heads were bent down, all hearts were palpitating.

Rafaël was beloved by his father's servants on account of his intrepidity, which knew no obstacles, for his skill in managing a horse, and in the use of all arms, and more than all, for the frankness and kindness which formed the most striking features of his character. In this country particularly, where the life of a man is reckoned of so little value, every one was inwardly disposed to excuse the youth, and to see nothing in the action he had committed but the result of warmth of blood and hasty passion.

Dona Jesuita arose; without a murmur she had always bent to the will of her husband, whom for many years she had been accustomed to respect; the mere idea of resisting him terrified her, and sent a cold shudder through her veins; but all the loving powers of her soul were concentrated in her heart. She adored her children, Rafaël in particular, whose indomitable character stood more in need than the others of the watchful cares of a mother.

"Senor," she said to her husband, in a voice choked with tears, "remember that Rafaël is your first-born; that his fault, however serious it may be, ought not to be inexcusable in your eyes, as you are his father; and that I—I—" she continued, falling on her knees, clasping her hands and sobbing, "I implore your pity! pardon, senor! pardon for my son!"

Don Ramon coldly raised his wife, whose face was inundated with tears, and after obliging her to resume her place in her chair, said—

"It is, above all, as a father, that I should be without pity! Refaël is an assassin and an incendiary! he is no longer my son!"

"What do you mean to do?" Dona Jesuita cried.

"How does that concern you, madam?" Don Ramon replied, harshly; "the care of my honour concerns myself alone. Enough for you to know that this fault is the last your son will commit."

"Oh!" she said, with terror, "will you then become his executioner?"

"I am his judge," the implacable gentleman replied. "Nô Eusebio, get two horses ready."

"My God! my God!" the poor mother cried, rushing towards her son; "will no one come to my assistance?"

All present were moved; Don Ramon himself could not restrain a tear.

"Oh!" she cried, with a wild joy, "he is saved! God has softened the heart of this inflexible man!"

"You are mistaken, madam," Don Ramon said; "your son is no longer mine; he belongs to justice!"

Then fixing on his son a look cold as a steel blade, he said in a voice so stern, that in spite of himself it made the young man start—

"Don Rafaël, from this instant you no longer form a part of this society, which your crimes have horrified; it is with wild beasts that I condemn you to live and die."

On hearing this awful sentence, Dona Jesuita took a few steps towards her son, but fell prostrate.

Up to this moment Rafaël had, with a great effort, suppressed the emotions which agitated him, but at this last accident he could no longer restrain himself; he sprang towards his mother, burst into tears, and uttered a piercing cry.

"My mother! my mother!"

"Come this way," said Don Ramon, laying his hand upon his shoulder.

The boy stopped, staggering like a drunken man.

"Look, sir! pray look!" he cried, with a heart-broken sob; "my mother is dying!"

"It is you who have killed her!" the haciennero replied, coldly.

Rafaël turned round as if a serpent had stung him.

"Kill me, sir; for I swear to you that in the same manner as you have been pitiless to my mother and me, if I live I will hereafter be pitiless to you!"

Don Ramon cast upon him a look of contempt.

"Follow me," he said.

"I will follow you," the boy repeated.

Dona Jesuita, who was coming to her senses, perceived the departure of her son, as if in a dream.

"Rafaël! Rafaël!" she shrieked.

The young man hesitated for a second; then, with a bound, he sprang towards her, kissed her with wild tenderness, and rejoining his father, said—

"Now I can die! I have bidden adieu to my mother."

And they went out.

The household, deeply moved by this scene, separated without communicating their impressions to each other, but all penetrated with sincere grief.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MOTHER.

Two horses, held by the bridle by Nô Eusebio, were waiting at the door of the hacienda.

"Shall I accompany you, señor?" asked the major-domo.

"No," the haciennero replied, drily.

He mounted, and placed his son across the saddle before him.

"Lead back the second horse," he said; "I do not want it."

And, plunging his spurs into the sides of his horse, which snorted with pain, he set off at full speed.

The major-domo returned to the house, shaking his head sadly.

As soon as the hacienda had disappeared behind a swell in the ground, Don Ramon stopped, drew a silk handkerchief from his breast, bandaged the eyes of his son without saying a word to him, and then again resumed his course.

This ride in the desert lasted a long time; it had something dismal about it that chilled the soul.

This horseman, clothed in black, gliding along through the sands, bearing before him on his saddle, a boy, whose starts and writhings alone proclaimed his existence, had a fatal and strange aspect, which would have impressed the bravest man with terror.

Many hours had passed without a word being exchanged between the son and the father; the sun began to sink in the horizon, a few stars already appeared in the dark blue of the sky—but the horse still went on.

The desert, every instant, assumed a more dismal and wild appearance; every trace of vegetation had disappeared; only here and there heaps of bones, whitened by time, marbled the sand with livid spots; birds of prey hovered slowly over the horseman, uttering hoarse cries; and in the mysterious depths of the chaparals, wild beasts, at the approach of night, preluded their rude concerts with dull roarings.

In these regions twilight does not exist; as soon as the sun has disappeared, the darkness is complete.

Don Ramon continued to gallop on. His son had not uttered a single complaint.

At length, about eight o'clock at night, the horsemen stopped. This feverish ride had lasted ten hours. The horse panted, throbbed, and staggered at every step.

Don Ramon cast an anxious glance around him: a smile of satisfaction curled his lip. On all sides the desert displayed its immense plains of sand; on one alone the skirt of a virgin forest cut the horizon with its strange profile, breaking in a sinister manner the monotony of the prospect.

Don Ramon dismounted, placed his son upon the sand, took the bridle from his horse, that it might eat the provender he gave it; then, after having acquitted himself of all these duties, with the greatest coolness he approached his son, and removed the bandage from his eyes.

The boy remained silent, fixing upon his father a dull, cold look.

"Sir!" Don Ramon said, in a sharp, dry tone, "you are here more than twenty leagues from my hacienda, in which you will never set your foot again under pain of death; from this moment you are alone; you have no longer either father, mother, or family; as you have proved yourself a wild beast, I condemn you to live with wild beasts; my resolution is irrevocable, your prayers could not change it."

"I shall not pray to you," the boy replied: "people do not pray to an executioner!"

Don Ramon started; he walked about in feverish agitation; but soon recovering himself, he continued—

"In this pouch are provisions for two days. I leave you this rifle, which in my hands never missed its mark; I give you also these pistols, this machete, and this knife, this hatchet, and powder and balls in these buffalo-horns. You will find with the provisions a steel and everything necessary for kindling a fire. I add to these things a bible, belonging to your mother. You are dead to society, to which you can never return; the desert is before you; it belongs to you; for me, I have no longer a son, adieu! The Lord be merciful to you; all is ended between us on earth; you are left alone, and without a family; it depends upon yourself, then, to commence a second existence, and to provide for your own wants. Providence never abandons those who place their confidence in it; henceforward, it alone will watch over you."

After having pronounced these words, Don Ramon, his countenance still harsh

and cold, replaced the bridle on his horse, restored his son to liberty by cutting the cords which bound him, and then getting into his saddle, set off at his horse's best speed.

"My mother! my mother!" Rafaël cried, and fell lifeless upon the sand. He had fainted.

After a long gallop, Don Ramon, insensibly, and as it were in spite of himself, slackened the speed of his horse, lending a keen ear to the vague noises of the desert, listening with anxiety, without rendering an account to himself why he did so, but expecting, perhaps, an appeal from his unfortunate son to return to him. Twice even his hand mechanically pulled the bridle as if he obeyed a secret voice which commanded him to retrace his steps; but the fierce pride of his race was still the stronger, and he continued his course.

The sun was rising at the moment Don Ramon arrived at the hacienda.

Two persons were standing side by side at the gate; the one was Dona Jesuita, the other the major-domo.

At sight of his wife, pale, mute, and motionless before him, like the statue of desolation, the haciennero felt an unutterable sadness weigh upon his heart; he wished to pass, but Dona Jesuita, making two steps towards him, and seizing the bridle of his horse, said, with agonized emotion—

"Don Ramon, what have you done with my son?"

The haciennero made no reply; on beholding the grief of his wife, remorse shot a pang into his heart.

Dona Jesuita waited in vain for an answer. Don Ramon looked at his wife; he was terrified at perceiving the furrows which grief had imprinted upon that countenance, so calm, so placid, but a few hours before.

The noble woman was livid; her pinched features had an inexpressible rigidity; her eyes, burnt with fever, were red and dry, two black and deep lines rendered them hollow and haggard; a large stain marbled each of her cheeks, the trace of tears, the source of which was dried up; she could weep no more; her voice was hoarse and broken, and her oppressed breast heaved painfully to allow the escape of a panting respiration.

"Don Ramon," she repeated, "what have you done with my son?"

The haciennero turned away his head with something like confusion.

"Oh! you have killed him!" she said, with a shriek.

"No," Don Ramon replied, terrified at her grief, and for the first time in his life forced to acknowledge the power of the mother who demands an account of her child.

"What have you done with him?" she screamed.

"Presently, when you are more calm, you shall know."

"I am calm," she replied; "why should you feign a pity you do not feel? My son is dead, and it is you who have killed him!"

Don Ramon alighted from his horse.

"Jesuita," he said to his wife, taking her hands, "I swear to you by all that is most sacred in the world, that your son exists; I have not touched a hair of his head."

"I believe you," said the poor mother; "but what is become of him?"

"Well," he replied, "since you insist upon knowing, learn that I have abandoned your son in the desert, but have left him the means to provide for his wants."

Dona Jesuita started, a nervous shudder crept through the whole of her frame.

"You have been very clement," she said, with bitter irony; "you have been very clement towards a boy of sixteen, Don Ramon; you felt a repugnance to bathe your hands in his blood; you preferred leaving that task to the wild beasts and ferocious Indians who people those solitudes."

"He was guilty!" the haciennero replied, in a low but firm voice.

"A child is never guilty in the eyes of her who has borne him in her bosom, and nourished him with her milk," she said, with energy. "It is well, Don Ramon, you have condemned your son, I—I will save him!"

"What would you do?" the haciennero said, terrified at the resolution he saw kindled in the eyes of his wife.

"What matters it to you? Don Ramon, I will accomplish my duty as you believe you have accomplished yours! God will judge between us! Tremble, lest He should one day demand of you an account of the blood of your son!"

Don Ramon bent his head beneath this anathema; with a pale brow, and a mind oppressed by heavy remorse, he went slowly into the hacienda.

"Oh!" cried Dona Jesuita, "may God grant that I may be in time!"

She then went out from the portico, followed by Nô Eusebio.

Two horses awaited them, concealed behind a clump of trees. They mounted immediately.

"Where are we going, senora?" the major-domo asked.

"In search of my son!" she replied in a shrill voice.

She seemed transfigured by hope; a bright colour flushed her cheeks; her black eyes darted lightning.

Nô Eusebio untied four magnificent bloodhounds, called *rastreros* in the country, and which were kept to follow trails; he made them smell a shirt belonging to Rafaël; the hounds rushed forward baying loudly. Nô Eusebio and Dona Jesuita galloped after them.

The dogs had no trouble in following the scent, it was straight and without obstruction.

When Dona Jesuita arrived at the spot where Rafaël had been abandoned by his father, the place was void!—the boy had disappeared!

The traces of his having been there were visible; a fire was not burnt out; everything indicated that Rafaël could not have quitted that place more than an hour.

"What is to be done?" Nô Eusebio asked anxiously.

"Push forward!" Dona Jesuita replied resolutely, urging her horse again into action.

Nô Eusebio followed her.

On the evening of the same day the greatest consternation prevailed at the Hacienda del Milagro. Dona Jesuita and Nô Eusebio had not returned.

Don Ramon ordered all the men to mount on horseback.

Provided with torches, the peons and vaqueros commenced a battue of an immense extent in search of their mistress and the major-domo.

The whole night passed away without bringing any satisfactory result.

At daybreak, the horse of Dona Jesuita was found half devoured. Its trappings were wanting.

The ground round the carcass of the horse appeared to have been the scene of a desperate conflict.

"Great Heaven!" cried Don Ramon, as he re-entered the hacienda, "is it possible that my chastisement has already commenced?"

Weeks, months, years passed away, without any circumstance lifting the corner of the mysterious veil which enveloped these sinister events, and, notwithstanding the most active and persevering researches, nothing could be learnt of the fate of Rafaël, his mother, and Nô Eusebio.

CHAPTER V.

THE PRAIRIE.

To the westward of the United States extended some years ago, many hundred miles beyond the Mississippi, an immense territory, composed of uncultivated lands, on which stood neither the log-house of the white man nor the hut of the Indian.

This vast desert, intersected by dark forests, with mysterious paths traced by the steps of wild beasts, and by verdant prairies with high and tufted herbage that undulates with the slightest breeze, is watered by powerful streams.

Over these plains, endowed with so rich a vegetation, wandered innumerable troops of wild horses, buffaloes, elks, big horns, and those thousands of animals which the civilisation of the other parts of America is every day driving back, and which regain their primitive liberty in these regions.

On this account, the most powerful Indian tribes have established their hunting-grounds in this country.

Towards the end of the year 1837, in the latter days of the month of September, by the Indians called the moon of the falling leaves—a man, still young, and who, from his complexion, notwithstanding his costume was entirely like that of the Indians, it was easy to perceive was a white man, was seated, about an hour before sunset, near a fire, the want of which began to be felt at this period of the year, at one of the most unfrequented spots of the prairie we have just described.

This man was at most thirty-five to thirty-six years old, though a few deeply-marked wrinkles on his broad white forehead seemed to indicate a more advanced age.

His features were handsome and noble, and impressed with that pride and energy which a wild life imparts. His black, prominent eyes, crowned with thick eye-brows, had a mild and melancholy expression, that tempered their brilliancy and vivacity; the lower part of his face was hidden by a long, thick beard, the dark tint of which contrasted with the peculiar paleness of his countenance.

He was tall, slender, and well-proportioned; his nervous limbs, which displayed muscles of extreme rigidity, proved that he was endowed with more than common strength.

His remarkably simple attire was composed of a mitasse, or kind of close drawers falling down to his ancles, and fastened to his hips by a leather belt, and of a cotton hunting-shirt, embroidered with ornaments in wool of different colours, which descended to his mid-leg. This blouse, open in front, left exposed his embrowned chest, upon which hung a scapulary of black velvet, from a slight steel chain. Boots of untanned deer skin protected him from the bites of reptiles, and rose to his knees. A cap of beaver skin, whose tail hung down behind, covered his head, while long and luxuriant curls of black hair, which were beginning to be threaded with white, fell over his broad shoulders. This man was a hunter.

A magnificent rifle within reach of his hand, the game-bag which was hung to his shoulder-belt, and the two buffalo-horns, suspended at his girdle, and filled with powder and balls, left no doubt in this respect. Two long double pistols were carelessly thrown near his rifle.

The hunter, armed with that long knife called a machete, or a short-bladed straight sabre, which the inhabitants of the prairies never lay aside, was occupied in conscientiously skinning a beaver, whilst carefully watching the haunch of a deer which was roasting at the fire, suspended by a string.

The spot where this man was seated was admirably chosen for a halt of a few hours.

It was a clearing at the summit of a moderately elevated hill, which, from its position, commanded the prairie for a great distance, and prevented a surprise. A spring bubbled up at a few paces from the place where the hunter had established his bivouac, and descended to the plain. The high and abundant grass afforded an excellent pasto for two superb horses, with wild and sparkling eyes, which, safely tethered, were enjoying their food. The fire, lighted with dry wood, and sheltered on three sides by the rock, only allowed a thin column of smoke to escape, scarcely perceptible at ten paces' distance, and a screen of tall trees concealed the encampment from the indiscreet looks of any who were in ambuscade in the neighbourhood.

The red fires of the setting sun tinged with beautiful flickering rays the tops of the great trees, and the sun itself was on the point of disappearing behind the mountains which bounded the horizon, when the horses raised their heads and pricked their ears—signs of restlessness which did not escape the hunter.

Although he heard no suspicious sound, and all appeared calm, he hastened to place the skin of the beaver before the fire stretched upon two crossed sticks, and, without rising, put out his hand towards his rifle.

The cry of the jay was heard, and repeated thrice at regular intervals.

The hunter laid his rifle by his side again with a smile, and resumed his attention to the supper. Almost immediately the grass was violently shaken, and two magnificent bloodhounds bounded up and lay down by the hunter, who patted them for an instant, and not without difficulty quieted their caresses.

The dogs only preceded by a few minutes a second hunter.

This new personage, much younger than the first,—for he did not appear to be more than twenty-two years old,—was a tall, thin, agile and powerfully-built man, with a slightly-rounded head, lighted by two grey eyes, sparkling with intelligence, and endowed with an open and loyal physiognomy, to which long light hair gave a somewhat childish appearance.

He was clothed in the same costume as his companion, and on arriving, threw down by the fire a string of birds which he was carrying at his shoulder.

The two hunters then, without exchanging a word, set about preparing a supper, that exercise always renders excellent.

The night had completely set in, and the howlings of wild beasts already resounded in the prairie.

The hunters, after supping with a good appetite, lit their pipes, and placing their backs to the fire, in order that the flame should not prevent them from perceiving the approach of any suspicious visitor whom darkness might bring them, smoked with the enjoyment of people who, after a long and painful journey, taste an instant of repose which they may not meet with again for some time.

"Well!" the first hunter said laconically.

"You were right," the other replied; "we have kept too much to the right, it was that which made us lose the scent."

"I was sure of it," the first speaker replied; "you see, Belhumeur, you trust too much to your Canadian habits: the Indians with whom we have to do here in no way resemble the Iroquois of your country."

Belhumeur nodded his head in sign of acquiescence.

"After all," the other continued, "this is of very little importance at this moment; what is urgent is to know who are our thieves."

"I know."

"Good!" the other said; "and who are the Indians who have dared to steal the traps marked with my cipher!"

"The Comanches."

"I suspected as much. By heavens, ten of our best traps stolen during the night! I swear, Belhumeur, that they shall pay for them dearly! And where are the Comanches at this moment?"

"Within about three leagues of us. It is a party of plunderers composed of a dozen men; according to the direction they are following, they are returning to their mountains."

"They shall not all reach home," said the hunter.

"Parbleu!" said Belhumeur with a laugh, "they will only get what they deserve. I leave it to you, Loyal Heart, to punish them for their insult; but you will be still more determined to avenge yourself when you know they are commanded by *Nehu Nutah*."

"Eagle Head!" cried Loyal Heart, almost bounding from his seat. "Oh, oh! yes, I know him, and God grant that this time I may settle the old account there is between us. His mocassins have long enough trodden the same path with me and barred my passage."

After pronouncing these words with an accent of hatred that made Belhumeur shudder, the hunter resumed his pipe and continued to smoke with a feigned carelessness that did not deceive his companion.

The conversation ceased, and the two hunters appeared to be absorbed in profound reflections, smoking silently beside each other.

"Shall I watch?" asked Belhumeur suddenly.

"No," Loyal Heart replied, in a low voice; "sleep, I will be sentinel for both."

Belhumeur, without making the least objection, laid himself down by the fire, and in a few minutes slept profoundly.

When the owl hooted its matin song, Loyal Heart, who during the night had remained motionless as a marble statue, awakened his companion.

"It is time," said he.

"Very good!" Belhumeur replied.

The hunters saddled their horses, descended the hill with precaution, and galloped off upon the track of the Comanches.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HUNTERS.

A FEW words now about the personages we have just brought upon the scene, and who are destined to play an important part in this history.

Loyal Heart—the only name by which the hunter was known throughout the prairies of the West—enjoyed an immense reputation for skill, loyalty, and courage among the Indian tribes, with whom his adventurous existence had brought him in contact. All respected him. The white hunters and trappers, whether Spaniards, North-Americans, or half-breeds, had a high opinion of his experience, and often had recourse to his counsels.

The pirates of the prairies themselves, thorough food for the gallows, the refuse of civilisation, who lived by rapine and plunder, did not dare attack him, and avoided as much as possible throwing themselves in his way.

This man had succeeded by the sheer force of intelligence and will, in creating for himself, and almost unknown to himself, a power accepted and recognised by the

ferocious inhabitants of these vast deserts,—a power which he only employed for good.

No one knew who **Loyal Heart** was, or whence he came; his early years were a mystery.

One day, about fifteen years before, when he was very young, some hunters had met him on the banks of the Arkansas, setting traps for beavers. The few questions put to him concerning his preceding life remained unanswered; and the hunters, people not very talkative by nature, fancying they perceived, from the embarrassment and reticence of the young man, that he had a secret, made a scruple about pressing him further.

At the same time, contrary to other hunters, or trappers of the prairies, who have all one or two companions with whom they associate, and whom they never leave, **Loyal Heart** lived alone, having no fixed habitation.

Always reserved and melancholy, he avoided the society of his equals, though always ready to render them services, or even to expose his life for them. Then, when they attempted to express their gratitude, he would clap spurs to his horse, and go and set his traps at a distance.

Every year, at the same period, that is to say, about the month of October, **Loyal Heart** disappeared for several weeks, without any one being able to suspect whither he was gone; and when he returned it was observed that for several days his countenance was more sad than ever.

One day he came back from one of these mysterious expeditions, accompanied by two magnificent young bloodhounds, which had from that time remained with him, and of which he seemed very fond.

Five years before the period at which we resume our narrative, he suddenly perceived the fire of an Indian camp through the trees.

A white youth, scarcely seventeen years of age, was fastened to a stake, and served as mark for the knives of the red-skins, who amused themselves with torturing him before they sacrificed him to their sanguinary rage.

Loyal Heart rushed in among the Indians, and placed himself in front of the prisoner, for whom he made a rampart of his body.

These Indians were Comanches. Astonished by this sudden irruption, they remained a few instants motionless, confounded by so much audacity.

Without losing a moment, **Loyal Heart** cut the bonds of the prisoner, and giving him a knife, they both prepared to sell their lives dearly.

White men inspire Indians with an instinctive terror; the Comanches, however, on recovering from their surprise, showed signs of rushing forward to attack the two men.

But the light of the fire, which fell full upon the face of the hunter, had allowed some of them to recognise him. The red-skins drew back with respect.

"**Loyal Heart!** the great pale-face hunter!"

Eagle Head, for so was the chief of these Indians named, did not know the hunter; it was the first time he had descended into the plains of the Arkansas, and he could not comprehend the exclamation of his warriors; besides, he cordially detested the pale faces. Enraged at what he considered cowardice on the part of those he commanded, he advanced alone against **Loyal Heart**, but then an extraordinary occurrence took place.

The Comanches threw themselves upon their chief, and notwithstanding the respect in which they held him, disarmed him.

Loyal Heart, after thanking them, himself restored his arms to the chief, who received them coldly, casting a sinister glance at his generous adversary.

The hunter, perceiving this feeling, shrugged his shoulders disdainfully, and departed with the prisoner.

Loyal Heart had, in less than ten minutes, made for himself an implacable enemy and a devoted friend.

The history of the prisoner was simple.

Having left Canada with his father, for the purpose of hunting, they had fallen into the hands of the Comanches; after a desperate resistance, his father had fallen covered with wounds. The Indians, irritated at a death which robbed them of a victim, had bestowed the greatest care upon the young man, in order that he might figure at the stake of punishment, and this would inevitably have happened had it not been for the providential intervention of Loyal Heart.

After having heard these particulars, the hunter asked the young man what his intentions were, and whether the rough apprenticeship he had gone through as a wood-ranger had not disgusted him.

"No!" the other replied; "on the contrary, I feel more determined than ever to follow this career; and, besides, I wish to avenge my father."

"Quite right," the hunter observed.

The conversation broke off at this point.

Loyal Heart, having taken the young man to one of his *cachés* (a sort of magazine dug in the earth, in which trappers conceal their wealth), produced the complete equipment of a trapper—gun, knife, pistols, game-bags, and traps—and then said,

"Go! and God speed you!"

The other looked at him without replying; he evidently did not understand him.

"You are free," resumed Loyal Heart; "here are all the objects necessary for your new trade—I give them to you, the desert is before you. Go."

The young man shook his head.

"No," he said, "I will not leave you unless you drive me from you; I am alone, without family or friends; you have saved my life, and I belong to you."

"It is not my custom to receive payment for the services I render," said the hunter.

"You require to be paid for them too dearly," the other answered warmly, "since you refuse to accept of gratitude. Take back your gifts, they are of no use to me; I am not a mendicant to whom alms can be thrown; I prefer going back and delivering myself up again to the Comanches—adieu!"

And the Canadian resolutely walked away.

Loyal Heart was deeply moved. This young man had so frank, so honest, and so spirited an air, that he felt something in his breast speak strongly in his favour

"Stop!" he said.

And the other stopped.

"I live alone," the hunter continued, "a great grief consumes me; why should you attach yourself to unhappy me?"

"To share your grief, if you think me worthy, and to console you, if that be possible; when man is left alone, he runs the risk of falling into despair; God has ordained that he should seek companions."

"That is true," the still undecided hunter murmured.

"Why do you pause?" the young man asked.

Loyal Heart gazed at him for a moment attentively; his eagle eye seemed to seek to penetrate his most secret thoughts; then, doubtless satisfied with his examination, he asked,

"What is your name?"

"Belhumeur," the other replied; "or, if you prefer it, George Talbot; but I am generally known by the first name."

The hunter smiled.

"That is a promising name," he said, holding out his hand. "Belhumeur," he added, "from this time you are my brother."

He kissed him above the eyes, as is the custom in the prairies in similar circumstances.

"For life and death," the Canadian replied.

And this was the way in which Loyal Heart and Belhumeur had become known to each other. During five years not a shadow of a cloud had darkened the friendship which these two superior natures had sworn to each other in the desert. On the contrary, every day seemed to increase it; they had but one heart between them. Completely relying on each other, divining each other's most secret thoughts, these two men had seen their strength augment tenfold, and such was their reciprocal confidence that they doubted nothing, and undertook and carried out the most daring expeditions.

Everything succeeded with them, nothing appeared impossible. It might be said that a charm protected them, and rendered them invulnerable.

Their reputation was thus spread far and near, and those whom their name did not strike with admiration repeated it with terror.

On the day we met them in the prairie, they had been the victims of an audacious robbery, committed by their ancient enemy Eagle Head, the Comanche chief, whose hatred, instead of being weakened by time, had, on the contrary, only increased.

The Indian, with the characteristic deceit of his race, had dissembled, and devoured in silence the affront he had undergone from his people, and of which the two pale-faced hunters were the direct cause, and awaited patiently the hour of vengeance. He had quietly dug a pit under the feet of his enemies, by prejudicing the red-skins by degrees against them, and adroitly spreading calumines about them. Thanks to this system, he had at length succeeded, or, at least, he thought he had, in making all the individuals dispersed over the prairies, even the white and half-breed hunters, consider these two men as their enemies.

As soon as this result had been obtained, Eagle Head placed himself at the head of thirty warriors; and, anxious to bring about a quarrel that might ruin the men whose death he had sworn to accomplish, he had in one night stolen all their traps, certain that they would not leave such an insult unpunished.

The chief was not deceived in his calculations; all had fallen out just as he had foreseen it would. In this position he awaited his enemies.

Thinking that they would find no assistance among the Indians or hunters, he flattered himself that with the thirty men he commanded he could easily seize the two hunters, whom he proposed to put to death.

But he had committed the fault of concealing the number of his warriors, in order to inspire more confidence in the hunters.

The latter had only partially been the dupes of this stratagem. Considering themselves sufficiently strong to contend even with twenty Indians, they had claimed the assistance of no one to avenge themselves upon enemies they despised, and had, as we have seen, set out resolutely in pursuit of the Comanches.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRAIL.

EAGLE HEAD had not taken any pains to conceal his trail.

It was perfectly visible in the high grass, and if now and then it appeared to be effaced, the hunters had but to turn to one side or the other to regain it.

Never before had a foe been pursued on the prairies in such a fashion. It must have appeared the more singular to Loyal Heart, who, for a long time, had been acquainted with the cunning of the Indians, and knew with what skill, when they judged it necessary, they caused every indication of their passage to disappear.

"This facility gave him cause to reflect. As the Comanches had taken no more pains to conceal their track, they must either believe themselves very strong, or else they had prepared an ambush.

The two hunters rode on, casting, from time to time, a look right and left, in order to be sure they were not deceived; but the track still continued in a straight line. It was impossible to meet with greater facilities in a pursuit. Belhumeur himself began to think this very extraordinary.

But if the Comanches had been unwilling to take the pains of concealing their trail, the hunters did not follow their example; they did not advance a step without effacing the trace of their passage.

They arrived thus on the banks of a tolerably broad rivulet, name the Verdigris.

Before crossing this little stream, on the other side of which the hunters would no longer be very far from the Indians, Loyal Heart stopped.

Both dismounted, and sought the shelter of a clump of trees, in order not to be perceived, if some Indian sentinel should be set to watch their approach.

When they were concealed in the thickness of the wood, Loyal Heart placed a finger on his lip to recommend prudence to his companion, and, approaching his lips to his ear, he said, in a voice low as a breath—

"Before we go any farther, let us consult."

Belhumeur bent his head in sign of acquiescence.

"I suspect some treachery," the hunter resumed; "Indians are too experienced warriors to act in this way without an imperative reason."

"That is true," the Canadian replied; "this trail is too good not to conceal a snare."

"Yes, but they have been too cunning; their craft has overshot the mark; old hunters, like us, are not to be deceived. We must redouble our prudence, and examine every leaf and blade of grass with care, before we venture nearer the encampment of the red-skins."

"Let us do better," said Belhumeur; "let us conceal our horses in a safe place, where we can find them at need, and then reconnoitre on foot the position and the number of our foe."

"You are right, Belhumeur," said Loyal Heart; "your counsel is excellent, we will put it in practice."

"I think we had better make haste in that case."

"Why so? On the contrary, do not let us hurry; the Indians, not seeing us appear, will relax in their watchfulness, and we can profit by their negligence to attack them, if we should be forced to have recourse to such extreme measures; besides, it would be better to wait for the night before we commence our expedition."

"In the first place, let us put our horses in safety."

The hunters left their concealment with the greatest precaution. Instead of crossing the river, they retraced their steps, and then bent a little to the left, and entered a ravine, in which they quickly disappeared among the high grass.

"I leave you to be guide," said Loyal Heart, "I really do not know whither you are leading me!"

"Leave it to me. I have by chance discovered, within two gunshots of this place, a sort of citadel, where our horses will be safe, and in which, if it should so fall out, we should be able to sustain a regular siege."

"*Caramba!*" the hunter exclaimed, who, by this oath, which was habitual with him, betrayed his Spanish origin, "how did you make this precious discovery?"

"Faith!" said Belhumeur, "in the simplest manner. I had just laid my traps, when, in climbing up the mountain before us in order to shorten my road, at nearly two-thirds of the ascent, I saw, protruding from the bushes the velvety muzzle of a superb bear."

"Ah! ah! I am pretty well acquainted with that adventure. You brought me that day, if I am not mistaken; not one, but two black bear-skins."

"That is a fact; my fine fellows were two, one male and the other female. You may easily suppose that at the sight of them my hunter's instincts were aroused; forgetful of my fatigue, I cocked my rifle, and set out in pursuit. You will see for yourself what sort of a fortress they had chosen," he added, as he alighted from his horse.

Before them rose, in the shape of an amphitheatre, a mass of rocks, which assumed the most curious and fantastic shapes; thin bushes sprang here and there from the interstices of the stones, climbing plants crowned the summits of the rocks, and gave to this mass, which rose more than six hundred feet above the prairie, the appearance of one of those ancient feudal ruins which are to be met with occasionally on the banks of the great rivers of Europe.

This place was named the White Castle, from the colour of the blocks of granite which formed it.

"We shall never be able to get up there with our horses," said Loyal Heart.

"Let us try, at all events!" said Belhumeur, pulling his horse by the bridle.

The ascent was rough, and any other horses than those of hunters, accustomed to the most difficult roads, would have been unable to accomplish it.

It was necessary to choose with care the spot on which the foot must be placed, and then to spring forward at a bound.

After half an hour of extraordinary difficulties they arrived at a sort of platform, ten yards broad at most.

"Here we are!" said Belhumeur, stopping.

"How here?" Loyal Heart replied, looking around on all sides without perceiving any opening.

"Come this way!" said Belhumeur, smiling.

And dragging his horse after him, he passed behind a block of the rock, the hunter following him.

After walking for five minutes in a sort of trench, at most three feet wide, which seemed to wind round upon itself, the adventurers found themselves suddenly before the yawning mouth of a deep cavern.

This path, formed by one of those convulsions of nature so frequent in these regions, was so well concealed behind the rocks which masked it, that it was impossible to discover it except by chance.

The hunters entered.

Before ascending the mountain, Belhumeur had collected a large provision of candle-wood; he lit two torches, one for himself, and one for his companion.

Then the grotto appeared to them in all its wild majesty.

Its walls were high and covered with brilliant stalactites, which reflected back the light, multiplying it, and forming a fairy-like illumination.

"This cavern," said Belhumeur, after he had given his friend time to examine it, "is, I have no doubt, one of the wonders of the prairies; this gallery, which descends in a gentle declivity before us, passes under the Verdigris, and debouches on the other side of the river, at a distance of more than a mile, into the plain. In addition to the gallery by which we entered, and that which is before us, there exist four others, all of which have issues at different places. You see that here we are in no risk of being surrounded.

Loyal Heart, enchanted with the discovery of this refuge, wished to examine it per-

fectly, and although he was naturally very silent, the hunter could not always withhold his admiration.

"Why have you never told me of this place before?" he said to Belhumeur.

"I waited for the opportunity," the latter replied.

The hunters secured their horses, with abundance of provender, in one of the compartments of the grotto, into which the light penetrated by imperceptible fissures; and then, when they were satisfied that the noble animals could wait for nothing during their absence, and could not escape, they threw their rifles over their shoulders, whistled to their dogs, and, descended with hasty steps the gallery which passed under the river.

Soon the air became moist around them, a dull, continuous noise was heard above their heads—they were passing under the Verdigris. Thanks to a species of lantern, formed by a hollow rock rising in the middle of the river's course, there was light sufficient to guide them.

After half an hour's walk they debouched in the prairie by an entrance masked by bushes and plants.

They had remained a long time in the grotto. In the first place, they had examined it minutely, like men who foresaw that some day or other they should stand in need of seeking a shelter there; next, they had made a kind of stable for their horses; and lastly, they had snatched a hasty morsel of food, so that the sun was on the point of setting at the moment when they set off.

Then commenced the true Indian pursuit. The two hunters, after having put their bloodhounds on the trail, glided silently in their traces, creeping on their hands and knees through the high grass, the eye on the watch, the ear on the listen, holding their breath, and stopping at intervals to inhale the air, and interrogate those thousand sounds of the prairies which hunters notice with incredible facility.

The desert was plunged in a death-like silence.

At the approach of night in these immense solitudes, nature seems to reflect, and prepare, by religious devotion, for the mysteries of darkness.

All at once the dogs came silently to a stop. The brave animals seemed to comprehend the value of silence in these parts, and that a single cry would cost their masters their lives.

Belhumeur cast a piercing glance around him. His eye flashed, he gathered himself up, and bounding like a panther, he sprang upon an Indian warrior, who, with his body bent forward, and his head down, seemed to know of the approach of an enemy.

The Indian was thrown upon his back, and before he could utter a cry Belhumeur had his throat in his grasp and his knee on his breast.

Then, with the greatest coolness, the hunter unsheathed his knife, and plunged it up to the hilt in the heart of his enemy.

When the savage knew that he was lost, he disdained to attempt any resistance, but fixing upon the Canadian a look of hatred and contempt, an ironical smile curled his lips, and he awaited death with a calm face.

Belhumeur replaced his knife in his belt, and pushing the body on one side, said imperturbably—

"One!"

And he crept on again.

Loyal Heart had watched the movements of his friend with the greatest attention, ready to succour him if it were necessary; when the Indian was dead, he calmly took up the trail again.

Ere long the light of a fire gleamed between the trees, and an odour of roasted meat struck the keen smell of the hunters.

They drew themselves up like two phantoms along an enormous live oak tree,

which was within a few paces of them, and embracing the gnarled trunk, concealed themselves among the tufted branches.

Then they found that they were soaring over the camp of the Comanches.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TRAVELLERS.

ABOUT the same hour a rather large party of white travellers halted upon the banks of the great Canadian river and prepared to encamp for the night in a magnificent position.

The hunters and Gambusinos who served as guides to the travellers hastened to unload a dozen mules.

With the bales they made an enclosure of an oval form, in the interior of which they lit a fire; then, without troubling themselves any further about their companions, the guides united together in a little group and prepared their evening repast.

A young officer, about twenty-five years of age, of martial bearing, with delicately-marked features, went up respectfully to a palanquin drawn by two mules and escorted by two horsemen.

"In what place would you wish, *senor*, the *senorita's* tent to be pitched?" the young officer asked.

"Where you please, Captain Aguilar, provided it be quickly done; my niece is sinking with fatigue," the cavalier replied.

He was a man of lofty stature, with hard marked features, and an eagle eye, whose hair was as white as snow, and who, under the large military cloak which he wore, allowed glimpses to appear of the splendid uniform of a Mexican general.

The captain retired, with another bow, and returning to the lanceros, he gave them orders to set up in the middle of the camp-enclosure, a pretty tent, striped rose-colour and blue, which was carried across the back of a mule.

Five minutes later, the general offered his hand gallantly to a young female, who sprang lightly from the palanquin, and conducted her to the tent.

Behind the general and his niece, two other persons entered the tent.

One was short and stout, with a full, rosy face, green spectacles, and a light-coloured wig, who appeared to be choking in the uniform of an army-surgeon.

This personage, whose age appeared to be about fifty, was named Jérôme Durieux; he was a Frenchman, and a surgeon in the Mexican service.

On alighting from his horse, he had seized and placed under his arm, with every appearance of respect, a large valise fastened to the hinder part of his saddle, and from which he seemed unwilling to part.

The second person was a girl of about fifteen years of age, of a forward and lively mien, with a turn-up nose and a bold look, belonging to the half-breed race, who served as lady's-maid to the general's niece.

A superb negro, decorated with the majestic name of Jupiter, hastened, aided by two or three Gambusinos, to prepare the supper.

"Well! doctor," said the general, smiling, to the fat man, who came in puffing like a bullock, "how do you find my niece this evening?"

"The *senorita* is always charming!" the doctor replied gallantly, as he wiped his brow. "Do you not find the heat very oppressive?"

"Faith! no," replied the general, "not more so than usual."

"Well, it appears so to me!" said the doctor with a sigh. "What are you laughing at, you little witch?" added he, turning towards the waiting-maid.

"Pay no attention to her, doctor; you know she is but a spoilt child," the young lady said.

"I have always told you, Dona Luz," persisted the doctor, knitting his large eyebrows, and puffing out his cheeks, "that that little girl is a demon, to whom you are much too kind, and who will end by playing you an evil turn some of these days."

"Oh! the wicked picker up of pebbles!" the girl said with a grin, in allusion to the doctor's mania.

"Come, come, peace!" said the general; "has to-day's journey fatigued you much, my dear niece?"

"Not exceedingly," the young lady replied; "during nearly a month that we have been travelling I have become accustomed to this sort of life, which, I confess, at first I found painful enough."

The general sighed, but made no reply. The doctor was absorbed by the care with which he was classifying the plants and stones which he had collected.

The half-breed girl flew about the tent like a bird, occupied in putting everything in order that her mistress might want.

We will take advantage of this moment of respite to sketch the portrait of the young lady.

Dona Luz de Bermudez was the daughter of a younger sister of the general.

She was a charming girl of sixteen at most. Her large black eyes, surmounted by eyebrows whose deep colour contrasted finely with the whiteness of her fair, pure forehead, were veiled by long velvety lashes, which modestly concealed their splendour; her little mouth was set off by teeth of pearl, edged by lips of coral; her delicate skin wore the down of the ripe peach, and her blue-black hair, when liberated from its bands, formed a veil for her whole person.

Her form was slender and supple, with all the curves of the true line of beauty. She possessed, in an eminent degree, that undulating, gracefully serpentine movement which distinguishes American women; her hands and feet were extremely small, and her step had the careless voluptuousness of the creole, so full of ever-varying attractions.

In short, in the person of this young lady might be said to be combined all the graces and perfections.

Ignorant as most of her compatriots, she was gay and cheerful; amused with the smallest trifle, and knowing nothing of life but the agreeable side.

But this beautiful statue was not animated; it was Pandora before Prometheus had stolen for her fire from heaven; Love had not yet brushed her with his wing, her brow had not yet been contracted by the pressure of thought, her heart had not yet beaten under the influence of passion.

Brought up under the care of the general in the utmost seclusion, she had only quitted it to accompany him in a journey he had undertaken through the prairies.

What was the object of this journey, and why had her uncle so positively insisted upon her making it with him? She knew not.

At the period when we met her, then, Dona Luz was a happy girl, living from day to day, satisfied with the present, and thinking nothing of the future.

Captain Aguilar entered, preceding Jupiter, who brought in the dinner.

The table was laid by Phœbe, the waiting-maid.

The repast consisted of preserved meats and a joint of roast venison.

Four persons took their places round the table; the general, his niece the captain, and the doctor.

Jupiter and Phœbe waited.

Conversation languished at first; but when the appetite of the party was a little abated, the young girl, who delighted in teasing the doctor, said—

"Have you made a rich harvest to-day, doctor?"

"Not too rich, senorita," he replied.

"Well! but," she said, laughing, "there appears to me to be such a lot of stones about it, that it only rested with yourself to gather enough to load a mule."

"You ought to be pleased with your journey," said the general, "for it offers you such an opportunity for indulging in your passion for plants of all sorts."

"Not too great, general, I must confess; the prairie is not so rich as I thought it was; and if it were not for the hope I entertain of discovering one plant, whose qualities may advance science, I should almost regret my little house at Guadeloupe."

"Bah!" the captain interrupted, "we are as yet only on the edge of the prairies. You will find, when we have penetrated further, that you will not be able to gather the riches which will spring from under your feet."

"God grant it may be so," said the doctor; "provided I find the plant I seek I shall be satisfied."

"Is it then such a very valuable plant?" asked Dona Luz.

"What, senorita!" cried the doctor, warming with the question. "A plant which Linnæus has described and classified, and which no one has since found! a plant that would make my reputation! And you ask me if it is valuable?"

"Of what use is it, then?" the young lady asked.

"None at all, that I am aware of," the doctor replied ingenuously.

Dona Luz broke into a silvery laugh, whose pearly notes might have made a nightingale jealous.

"And you call it a valuable plant?"

"Yes—if only for its rarity."

"Ah! that's all."

"Let us hope you will find it, doctor," said the general in a conciliatory tone.

"Jupiter, call the chief of the guides hither."

The negro left the tent, and almost immediately returned, followed by a Gambusino.

The latter was a man of about forty, tall in stature, square-built and muscular. His countenance, though not exactly ugly, had something repulsive in it for which the spectator was at a loss to account; his wild, sinister-looking eyes, buried under their orbits, cast a savage light, which with his low brow, his curly hair, and his coppery complexion, made altogether a not very agreeable whole. He wore the costume of a wood-ranger; he was cold, impassible, of a nature essentially taciturn, and answered to the name of *the Babler*, which, no doubt, the Indians or his companions had given him by antiphrasis.

"Here, my good fellow," said the general, handing him a glass filled to the brim with a sort of brandy, called mescal, from the name of the place where it is distilled, "drink this."

The hunter bowed, emptied the glass, which contained about a pint, at a draught; then, passing his cuff across his moustache, waited.

"I wish," said the general, "to halt for a few days, in some safe position, in order to make certain researches; shall we be secure here?"

"No," he replied, laconically.

"Why not?"

"Too many Indians and wild beasts."

"Do you know one more suitable?"

"Yes."

"Is it far?"

"No."

"At what distance?"

"Forty miles."

"How long will it take us to arrive there?"

"Three days."

"That will do. Conduct us thither. To-morrow, at sun-rise, we will set forward in our march."

"Is that all?"

"That is all."

"Good night."

And the hunter withdrew.

"What I admire in the Babbler," said the captain, with a smile, "is that his conversation never tires you."

"I should like it much better if he spoke more," said the doctor, shaking his head. "I always suspect people who are so afraid of saying too much; they generally have something to conceal."

The guide, after leaving the tent, joined his companions, with whom he began to talk in a low voice, but in a very animated manner.

The night was magnificent; the travellers, assembled in front of the tent, were chatting together, and smoking their cigars.

Dona Luz was singing one of those charming creole songs, which are so full of sweet melody and expression.

All at once a red-tinted light appeared in the horizon, increasing every instant, and a dull continuous noise, like the growling of distant thunder, was heard.

"What is that?" the general cried, rising hastily.

"The prairie is on fire," the Babbler replied, quietly.

At this terrible announcement, made so quietly, the camp was all in confusion.

It was necessary to fly instantly, if they did not choose to run the risk of being burnt alive.

One of the Gambusinos, taking advantage of the disorder, glided away among the baggage, and disappeared in the plain, after exchanging a mysterious signal with the Babbler.

CHAPTER IX.

THE COMANCHES.

THE two hunters, concealed among the branches of the cork-tree, were observing the Comanches.

The Indians depended upon the vigilance of their sentinels. Not suspecting their enemies were so near them, and were watching them, they crouched or lay around the fires, eating or smoking carelessly.

These savages, to the number of twenty-five, were dressed in their buffalo robes, and painted in the most varied and fantastic manner. Most of them had their faces covered with vermillion, others were entirely black, with a long white stripe upon each cheek; they wore their bucklers on their backs, with their bows and arrows, and near them lay their guns.

By the number of wolves' tails fastened to their mocassins, and which dragged on the ground, it was easy to perceive that they were all picked warriors.

At some paces from the group, Eagle Head leant motionless against a tree. With

his arms crossed on his breast, and leaning gently forward, he seemed to be listening to vague sounds.

Eagle Head was an Osage Indian; the Comanches had adopted him when quite young, but he had always preserved the costume and manners of his nation.

He was, at most, twenty-eight years of age, nearly six feet high, and his large limbs, upon which enormous muscles developed themselves, denoted extraordinary strength.

Differing in this respect from his companions, he only wore a blanket fastened round his loins, so as to leave his bust and his arms bare. The expression of his countenance was handsome and noble; his black, animated eyes, close to his aquiline nose, and his somewhat large mouth, gave him a faint resemblance to a bird of prey. His hair was shaved off, with the exception of a tuft upon the middle of his head, which produced the effect of the crest of a helmet, and a long scalp-lock, in which was fixed a bunch of eagle's feathers, hung down behind him.

His face was painted of four different colours—blue, white, black, and red; the wounds inflicted by him upon his enemies were marked in blue upon his naked breast. Mocassins of untanned deer-skin came up above his knees, and numerous wolves' tails were fastened to his heels.

Fortunately for the hunters, the Indians were on the war-path, and had no dogs with them; but for this, they would have been discovered long before, and could not possibly have approached so near the camp.

In spite of his statue-like immobility, the eye of the chief sparkled, his nostrils dilated, and he lifted his right arm mechanically, as if to impose silence upon his warriors.

"We are discovered," Loyal Heart murmured.

"What is to be done?" Belhumeur replied.

"Act," said the trapper, laconically.

Both then glided silently from branch to branch, from tree to tree, till they reached the opposite side of the camp, just above the place where the horses of the Comanches were hobbled to graze.

Belhumeur alighted softly, and cut the thongs that held them; the horses, excited by the whips of the hunters, rushed out, neighing and kicking.

The Indians rose in disorder, and hastened, with loud cries, in pursuit of their horses.

Eagle Head alone, as if he had guessed the spot where his enemies were in ambush, directed his steps straight towards them, screening himself as much as possible behind the trees which he passed.

The hunters drew back, looking carefully around, so as not to allow themselves to be encompassed.

The cries of the Indians grew fainter in the distance; they were all in eager pursuit of their horses.

The chief found himself alone in presence of his two enemies.

On arriving at a tree whose enormous trunk appeared to guarantee the desired safety, disdaining to use his gun, and the opportunity seeming favourable, he adjusted an arrow to his bow-string. But whatever might be his prudence and address, he could not make this movement without discovering himself a little. Loyal Heart raised his gun, the trigger was pressed, the ball whizzed, and the chief bounded into the air, uttering a howl of rage, and fell upon the ground.

His arm was broken.

The two hunters were already by his side.

"Not a movement, red-skin," Loyal Heart said to him; "not a movement, or you are a dead man!"

The Indian remained motionless, apparently stoical.

"I could kill you," the hunter continued; "but I will not do so. This is the second time I have given you your life, chief, but it will be the last. Cross my path no more, and, remember, do not steal my traps again."

"Eagle Head is a chief among the men of his tribe," the Indian replied; "he does not fear death; the white hunter may kill him, he will not complain."

"No, I will not kill you, chief; my God forbids the shedding of human blood unnecessarily."

"Wah!" said the Indian, with an ironical smile, "my brother is a missionary."

"No, I am an honest trapper, and do not wish to be an assassin."

"My brother speaks the words of old women," the Indian continued; "Nehumutah never pardons."

"You will do as you please, chief," the hunter replied; "I have no intention of trying to change your nature; only remember you are warned—farewell!"

"And the devil take you!" Belhumeur added, giving him a contemptuous shove with his foot.

The chief appeared insensible even to this fresh insult, save that his brows contracted slightly. He did not stir, but followed his enemies with an implacable look, while they, without troubling themselves further about him, plunged into the forest.

"You may say what you like, Loyal Heart," said Belhumeur, "you ought to have killed him."

"Bah! what for?" the hunter asked, carelessly.

"*Cascaras!* what for? Why, there would have been one head of vermin the less in the prairie."

"Where there are so many," said the other, "one more or less cannot signify."

"Humph! that's true!" Belhumeur replied, apparently convinced; "but where are we going now?"

"To look after our traps, *caramba!* Do you think I will lose them?"

"Humph! that's a good thought."

The hunters advanced in the direction of the camp in the Indian fashion. After progressing in this way for twenty minutes, they arrived at the camp. The Indians had not yet returned; but in all probability, it would not be long before they did so. All their baggage was scattered. Two or three horses, which had not felt disposed to run away, were browsing quietly on the peavines.

Without losing time, the hunters set about collecting their traps, which was soon done. Each loaded himself with five, and, without further delay, they resumed the way to the cavern.

Notwithstanding the tolerably heavy weight they carried on their shoulders, the two men marched lightly, much pleased at having so happily terminated their expedition.

They had gone on thus for some time, and could already hear the murmur of the waters of the river, when the neighing of a horse struck their ears.

"We are pursued," said Loyal Heart, stopping.

"Hum!" Belhumeur remarked, "it is, perhaps, a wild horse."

"No; a wild horse does not neigh in that manner; it is the Comanches; but we can soon know," he added, as he threw himself down to listen.

"I was sure of it," he said; "it is the Comanches; but they are not following a true trail—they are hesitating."

"Or perhaps their march is retarded by the wound of Eagle Head."

"That's possible! Oh! oh! do they fancy themselves capable of catching us, if we wished to escape from them?"

"Ah! if we were not loaded, that would soon be done."

Loyal Heart reflected a minute.

"Come," he said, "we have still half an hour, and that is more than we want."

A rivulet flowed at a short distance from them; the hunter entered its bed with his companion, who followed all his movements.

When he reached the middle of the stream, Loyal Heart carefully wrapped up the traps in a buffalo-skin, that no moisture might come to them, and then he allowed them quietly to drop to the bottom of the stream.

This precaution taken, the hunters crossed the rivulet, and made a false trail of about two hundred paces, and afterwards returned cautiously so as not to leave a print that might betray their return. They then re-entered the forest, after having, with a gesture, sent the dogs back. The intelligent animals obeyed, and disappeared.

This resolution to send away the dogs was useful in assisting to throw the Indians off the track, for they could scarcely miss following the traces left by the bloodhounds in the high grass.

Once in the forest, the hunters again climbed up a tree, and began to advance between heaven and earth—a mode of travelling much more frequently used than is believed in Europe, in this country where it is often impossible, on account of the underwood and the trees, to advance without employing an axe to clear a passage.

They advanced in this fashion before their enemies, who drew nearer and nearer, and they soon perceived them under them, marching in Indian file, that is to say, one behind another.

Eagle Head came first, half lying upon his horse, on account of his wound.

When the Comanches passed them, the two trappers gathered themselves up among the leaves, holding their breath. The most trifling circumstance would have sufficed to proclaim their presence.

The Indians passed without seeing them. The hunters resumed their leafy march.

"Ouf!" said Belhumeur, at the end of a minute. "I think we have got rid of them this time!"

"Do not halloo before you are out of the wood; these demons of red-skins are cunning, they will not long be the dupes of our stratagem."

"*Sacrebleu!*" the Canadian suddenly exclaimed, "I have let my knife fall, I don't know where; if these devils find it, we are lost."

"Most likely," Loyal Heart murmured; "the greater reason then for not losing a single minute."

In the meantime, the forest, which till then had been calm, began all at once to grow excited, the birds flew about uttering cries of terror, and in the thick underwood they could hear the dry branches crack.

"What's going on now?" said Loyal Heart. "The forest appears to be turned topsy-turvy!"

The hunters sprang up to the top of the tree in which they were, and which happened to be one of the loftiest in the forest.

An immense light tinged the horizon at about a league from the spot. This light increased every minute, and advanced with giant strides.

"Curses on them!" cried Belhumeur, the Comanches have fired the prairie."

"Yes. and I believe this time that, as you said just now, we are lost," Loyal Heart replied, coolly.

"What's to be done?" said the Canadian; "in an instant we shall be surrounded."

Loyal Heart reflected seriously.

At the end of a few seconds he raised his head, and a smile of triumph curled the corners of his mouth.

"They have not got us yet," he replied; "follow me, my brother."

CHAPTER X.

THE PRESERVER.

SCARCE had his enemies disappeared among the trees, ere Eagle Head raised himself, bent his body forward, and listened to ascertain if they were really departing. As soon as he had acquired that certainty, he tore off a morsel of his blanket, with which he wrapped up his arm as well as he could, and, in spite of the weakness produced by loss of blood, set off resolutely on the trail of the hunters.

He accompanied them, himself unseen, to the limits of the camp. There, concealed behind an ebony tree, he witnessed, without being able to prevent it, the search made by the hunters for their traps, and, at length, their departure after recovering them.

Although the bloodhounds were excellent dogs, trained to scent an Indian from a distance, by a providential chance, which probably saved the life of the Comanche chief, they had fallen upon the remains of the repast of the red-skins, and their masters, not dreaming that they were watched, did not think of commanding their vigilance.

The Comanches at length regained their camp, after catching their horses.

The sight of their wounded chief caused them great surprise, and still greater anger, of which Eagle Head took advantage to send them all off again in pursuit of the hunters, who, retarded by the traps they carried, could not be far off.

They had been but for an instant the dupes of the stratagem invented by Loyal Heart, and had not been long in recognising traces of the passage of their enemies.

At this moment Eagle Head, ashamed of being thus held in check by two determined men, whose cunning deceived all his calculations, resolved to put an end to them at once, by carrying into execution the diabolical project of setting fire to the forest.

In consequence, dispersing his warriors in various directions, so as to form a vast circle, he ordered the high grass to be set on fire in various places simultaneously.

The idea, though barbarous and worthy of the savage warriors who employed it, was a good one. The hunters, after having vainly endeavoured to escape from the network of flame which encompassed them on all sides, would be obliged, in spite of themselves, to surrender quietly to their ferocious enemies.

Eagle Head had calculated and foreseen everything, except the most easy and most simple thing, the only chance of safety that would be left to Loyal Heart and his companion.

As we have said, at the command of their chief the warriors had dispersed, and had lighted the conflagration at several points simultaneously.

At this advanced season of the year the plants and grass, parched by the incandescent rays of the summer's sun, were immediately in a blaze, and the fire extended in all directions with frightful rapidity.

Not, however, so quickly as not to allow a certain time to elapse before it united.

Loyal Heart had not hesitated. Whilst the Indians were running like demons around the barrier of flame they had just opposed to their enemies, and were uttering yells of joy, the hunter, followed by his friend, had rushed at full speed between two walls of fire, which from right and left advanced upon him, hissing, and threatening to unite at once above his head and beneath his feet. Amidst calcined trees which fell with a crash, blinded by clouds of thick smoke which stopped their respiration, burnt by showers of sparks which poured upon them from all parts, following

boldly their course beneath a vault of flame, the intrepid adventurers had cleared, at the cost of a few trifling burns, the accursed enclosure in which the Indians had thought to bury them for ever, and were already far from the enemies who were congratulating themselves upon the success of their artful and barbarous plan.

The conflagration, meantime, assumed formidable proportions; the forest shrivelled up under the fire; the prairie was but one sheet of flame, in the midst of which wild animals, driven from their dens and lairs by this unexpected catastrophe, ran about, mad with terror.

The sky gleamed with blood-red reflections, and an impetuous wind swept before it both flames and smoke.

The Indians were terrified at their own handiwork, on seeing around them entire mountains lighted up like beacons; the earth became hot, and immense herds of buffaloes made the ground tremble in their furious course, while they uttered those bellowings which fill with terror the hearts of the bravest men.

In the camp of the Mexicans everything was in the greatest disorder; all was noise and frightful confusion. The horses had broken away, and fled in all directions; the men seized their arms and ammunition; others carried the saddles and packages.

Every one was screaming, swearing, commanding—all were running about the camp as if they had been struck with madness.

The fire continued to advance, swallowing up everything in its passage, preceded by a countless number of animals of all kinds, who bounded along with howls of fear, pursued by the scourge.

A thick smoke, laden with sparks, was already passing over the camp of the Mexicans; twenty minutes more and all would be over with them.

The general, pressing his niece in his arms, in vain demanded of the guides the best means of avoiding the immense peril which threatened them.

But these men, terrified by the imminence of the peril, had lost all self-possession. And then what remedy could be employed?

The strong breeze, however, which up to that moment had kept alive the conflagration, by lending it wings, sank all at once.

There was not a breath of air. The progress of the fire slackened. Providence granted these unhappy creatures a few minutes more. At this moment the camp presented a strange aspect.

All the men, struck with terror, had lost the sense even of self-preservation.

The *lanceros* confessed to each other.

The guides were plunged in gloomy despair.

The general accused Heaven of his misfortune.

As for the doctor, he only regretted the plant he could not discover; with him every other consideration yielded to that.

Dona Luz, with her hands clasped, and her knees on the ground, was praying fervently.

The fire continued to approach, with its vanguard of wild beasts.

"Oh!" cried the general, shaking the arm of the guide violently, "will you leave us to be burnt thus?"

"What can be done against the will of God?" the Babbler replied, stoically.

"Are there no means of escaping death?"

"None!"

"There is one!" a man cried, who, with a scorched face, and half-burnt hair, rushed forward, followed by another individual.

"Who are you?" the general exclaimed.

"That is of little consequence," the stranger replied, drily; "I come to save you! my companion and I were out of danger; to succour you we have braved unheard-of perils. Your safety is in your own hands; you have only to will it."

"Command!" the general replied, "I will be the first to give you the example of obedience."

"Have you no guides with you, then?"

"Certainly we have," said the general.

"Then they are traitors, for the means I am about to employ are known to everybody in the prairie."

The general darted a glance of mistrust at the Babbler, who was not able to suppress an appearance of surprise at the sudden coming of the two strangers.

"Well," said the hunter, "that is an account you can settle with them hereafter; we have something else to think of now."

The Mexicans, at the sight of this determined man, with his sharp impressive language, had instinctively recognised a preserver; they felt their courage revive with hope, and held themselves ready to execute his orders.

"Be quick!" said the hunter, "and pull up all the grass that surrounds the camp."

Every one set to work at once.

"For our part," the stranger continued, addressing the general, "we will take wetted blankets, and spread them in front of the baggage."

The general, the captain, and the doctor, under the directions of the hunter, did as he desired, whilst his companion lassoed the horses and the mules.

"Be quick! be quick!" the hunter cried incessantly, "the fire gains upon us!"

Every one redoubled his exertions, and in a short time a large space was cleared.

Dona Luz gazed with admiration at this stranger, who had suddenly appeared among them in such a providential manner, and who, amidst the horrible danger that enveloped them, was as calm and self-possessed as if he had had the power to command the awful scourge which continued to advance upon them with giant strides.

The maiden could not take her eyes off him; in spite of herself, she felt attracted towards this unknown preserver.

When the grass and herbs had been pulled up with that feverish rapidity which men in fear of death display in all they do, the hunter smiled calmly.

"Now," he said, addressing the Mexicans, "the rest concerns myself and friend; leave us to act; wrap yourselves carefully in damp blankets."

Every one followed his directions.

The stranger cast a glance around him, and then after making a sign to his friend, walked straight towards the fire.

"I shall not quit you," the general said, earnestly.

"Come on, then," the stranger replied, laconically.

When they reached the extremity of the space where the grass had been pulled up, the hunter piled up a heap of plants and dry wood with his feet, and scattering a little gunpowder over it, he set fire to the mass.

"What are you doing?" the general exclaimed.

"As you see, I make fire fight against fire," the hunter replied, quietly.

His companion had acted in the same manner in an opposite direction.

A curtain of flames arose rapidly around them, and, for some minutes, the camp was almost concealed beneath a vault of fire.

A quarter of an hour of terrible anxiety and intense expectation ensued.

By degrees the flames became less fierce, the air more pure; the smoke dispersed, the roarings of the conflagration diminished.

At length they were able to recognise each other in this horrible chaos.

A sigh of relief burst from every breast.

The camp was saved!

The conflagration, whose roaring became gradually more dull, conquered by the hunter, went to convey destruction in other directions.

"You have saved the life of my niece," said the general warmly: "how shall I discharge my debt?"

"You owe me nothing, sir," the hunter replied, with noble simplicity; "in the prairie all men are brothers; I have only performed my duty."

As soon as the first moments of joy were passed, and the camp had been put in a little order, every one felt the necessity for repose.

The two strangers, who had constantly repulsed modestly, but firmly, the advances the general had made in the warmth of his gratitude, threw themselves carelessly on the baggage for a few hours' rest.

A little before dawn they arose.

"The earth must be cool by this time," said the hunter: "let us be gone before these people wake."

"Let us be gone!" the other replied laconically.

At the moment he was about to pass out of the camp, a hand was laid lightly upon the shoulder of the elder. He turned, and Dona Luz was before him.

The two men stopped and bowed respectfully to the young lady.

"Are you going to leave us?" she asked in a soft and melodious voice.

"We must, *senorita*," the hunter replied.

"I understand," she said with a charming smile; "now that, thanks to you, we are saved, you have nothing more to do here—is it not so?"

The two men bowed without replying.

"Grant me a favour," she said.

"Name it, *senorita*."

She took from her neck a little diamond cross.

"Keep this, in remembrance of me."

The hunter hesitated.

"I beg you to do so," she murmured in an agitated voice.

"I accept it, *senorita*," the hunter said; "I shall have another talisman to add to that which my mother gave me."

"Thank you," the girl replied joyfully; "one word more."

"Speak it, lady."

"What are your names?"

"My companion is called *Belhumeur*. I am *Loyal Heart*."

After bowing a second time, in sign of farewell, the two hunters departed at a quick pace, and soon disappeared in the darkness.

Dona Luz looked after them as long as she could perceive them, and then returned slowly and pensively towards her tent, repeating to herself—

"*Loyal Heart*! Oh! I shall remember that name."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SURPRISE.

A FEW days after the events we have related in our preceding chapter, a strange scene was passing in a settlement built scarcely two years before, upon the banks of the great Canadian river, in a beautiful position at the foot of a verdant hill.

This settlement consisted of about a hundred cabins, grouped capriciously near

each other, and protected by a little fort, armed with four small cannon which commanded the course of the river.

The village, though so young, had already, thanks to American activity, acquired all the importance of a city. Two taverns overflowed with tipplers, and three temples of different sects served to gather together the faithful.

The inhabitants moved about here and there with the preoccupation of people who work seriously and look sharply after their affairs.

Numerous canoes ploughed the river, and carts loaded with merchandise passed about in all directions.

Nevertheless, in spite of all this movement, it was easy to observe that a certain uneasiness prevailed.

The inhabitants questioned each other, groups were formed upon the steps of doors, and several men, mounted upon powerful horses, rode rapidly away, as scouts, in all directions, after taking their orders from the captain commanding the fort, who, dressed in uniform, with a telescope in his hand, was walking backwards and forwards with hasty steps, upon the glacis of the little fort.

By degrees, the canoes regained the shore, the carts were unteamed, the beasts of burden were collected in the home pastures, and the entire population assembled upon the square of the village.

The sun was sinking rapidly towards the horizon, night would soon be upon them, and the horsemen sent to the environs had all returned.

"You see," said the captain, "that we have nothing to fear, it was only a false alarm; you may return peaceably to your dwellings, no trace of Indians can be found for twenty miles round."

"Hum!" said an old half-breed hunter, "Indians are not long in travelling twenty miles!"

"That is possible, White Eyes," the commandant replied, "but be convinced that if I have acted as I have done, it has been simply with the view of reassuring the people; the Indians will not dare to avenge themselves."

"Indians always avenge themselves, captain."

"You have drunk too much whisky, White Eyes; you are dreaming, with your eyes open."

"God grant you may be right, captain! but I have passed all my life in the clearings, and know the manners of the red-skins, while you have only been on the frontiers two years."

"That is quite as long as is necessary," the captain interrupted, peremptorily.

"Nevertheless, with your permission, Indians are men, and the two Comanches, who were treacherously assassinated here, in contempt of the laws of nations, were warriors renowned in their tribes."

"White Eyes, you are of mixed breed, you lean a little too much to the red race," said the captain.

"The red race," the hunter replied, proudly, "are loyal; they do not assassinate for the pleasure of shedding blood, as you yourself did, four days ago, in killing those two warriors who were passing inoffensively in their canoe, under the pretence of trying a new gun."

"Well, well! that's enough! Spare me your comments, White Eyes."

The hunter bowed awkwardly, threw his gun upon his shoulder and retired grumbling.

"Blood cries for vengeance; the red-skins are men, and will not leave the crime unpunished."

The captain retired into the fort, much annoyed by what the half-breed had said to him. Gradually the inhabitants dispersed and closed their dwellings with that listlessness peculiar to men accustomed to risk their lives every minute.

An hour later night had completely set in, thick darkness enveloped the village, and the inhabitants, fatigued with the rude labours of the day, were reposing in profound security.

The scouts sent out by the captain towards the decline of day had badly performed their duty.

Scarcely a mile from the village, concealed by the thick bushes and intertwining trees of a virgin forest, of which the nearest part had already fallen under the indefatigable axe of the clearers, two hundred warriors of the tribe of the Serpent, guided by several renowned chiefs, among whom was Eagle Head, who, although wounded, insisted upon joining the expedition, were waiting, with that Indian patience which nothing can foil, the propitious moment.

Several hours passed thus, and the silence of night was not disturbed by any noise whatever.

The Indians, motionless as bronze statues, waited without displaying the slightest impatience.

Towards eleven o'clock the moon rose.

At the same instant the distant howling of a dog was repeated twice.

Eagle Head then left the tree behind which he had been screened, and began to creep with extreme address and velocity, in the direction of the village.

On reaching the skirts of the forest he stopped; then he imitated the neighing of a horse with such perfection that two horses of the village immediately replied.

After waiting for a few seconds, the practised ear of the chief perceived an almost insensible noise among the leaves; the bellowing of an ox was heard a short distance away; then the chief arose and waited.

Two seconds later a man joined him.

This man was White Eyes, the old hunter.

A sinister smile curled the corners of his thin lips.

"What are the white men doing?" the chief asked.

"They are asleep," the half-breed answered.

"Will my brother give them up to me?"

"For a fair exchange."

"A chief has but one word. The pale woman and the grey-head?"

"Are here."

"Shall they belong to me?"

"All the inhabitants of the village shall be placed in the hands of my brethren."

"Och! Has not the hunter come?"

"Not yet."

"He will come presently?"

"Probably he will."

"What does my brother say now?"

"Where is that which I demanded of the chief?"

"The skins, the guns, and the powder, are in the rear, guarded by my young men."

"I trust to you, chief," the hunter replied, "but if you deceive me——"

"An Indian has but one word."

"That is good! Whenever you please, then."

Ten minutes later the Indians were masters of the village, all the inhabitants of which, roused one after the other, were made prisoners without a struggle.

The fort was surrounded by the Comanches, who, after heaping up at the foot of the walls trunks of trees, carts, furniture, and all the farming implements of the colonists, only waited for a signal from their chief to commence the attack.

All at once a vague form stood out from the top of the fort, and the cry of the sparrow-hawk echoed through the air.

The Indians set fire to the kind of pyre they had raised and rushed towards the pailsades, uttering altogether their horrible and piercing war-cry, which, on the frontiers, is always the signal for a massacre.

CHAPTER XII.

INDIAN VENGEANCE.

THE position of the Americans was most critical.

The captain, surprised by the silent attack of the Comanches, had been suddenly awakened by the frightful war-cry they uttered, as soon as they had set fire to the materials heaped up in front of the fort.

Springing out of bed, the brave officer half-dressed himself, and, sabre in hand, rushed towards the side where the garrison reposed; they had already taken the alarm, and were hastening to their posts with that careless bravery which distinguishes the Yankees.

The garrison amounted, captain included, to twelve men.

How, with so weak a force, could they resist the Indians, whose diabolical profiles they saw lit up in the sinister reflections of the conflagration?

The officer sighed deeply.

"We are lost," he cried.

In the incessant combats fought on the Indian frontiers, the laws of civilized warfare are completely unknown.

The *væ victis* reigns in the full acceptance of the term.

Inveterate enemies, who fight one against another with all the refinements of barbarity, never ask or give quarter.

Every conflict, then, is a question of life and death.

Such is the custom.

The captain knew this well, therefore he did not indulge in the least illusion as to the fate that awaited him if he fell into the hands of the Comanches.

He had committed the fault of allowing himself to be surprised by the red-skins, and he must undergo the consequence of his imprudence.

But the captain was a brave soldier; certain of not being able to retreat safe and sound from the trap into which he had fallen, he wished to succumb with honour.

The soldiers had no need to be excited to do their duty; they knew as well as their captain that they had no chance of safety left.

The defenders of the fort, therefore, placed themselves resolutely behind the barricades, and began to fire upon the Indians with a precision that speedily caused them a heavy loss.

The first person the captain saw, on mounting the platform of the little fort, was White Eyes.

"Ah, ah!" murmured the officer to himself, "what is this fellow doing here?"

Drawing a pistol from his belt, he walked straight up to the half-breed, and, seizing him by the throat, clapped the barrel of his pistol to his breast, saying to him with that coolness which the Americans inherit from the English—

"In what fashion did you introduce yourself into the fort, you old screech owl?"

"Why, by the gate seemingly," the other replied, unmoved.

"You must be a sorcerer, then!"

"Perhaps I am."

"A truce with your jokes, mixed-blood: you have sold us to your brothers the red-skins."

A sinister smile passed over the countenance of the half-breed; the captain perceived it.

"But your treachery shall not profit you, you miserable scoundrel!" he said, in a voice of thunder.

The hunter disengaged himself by a quick, unexpected movement; then, with a spring backwards, and clapping his gun to his shoulder, he said—

"We shall see," with a sneer.

These two men, placed face to face upon that narrow platform, lighted by the sinister reflection of the fire, the intensity of which increased every minute, would have had a terrific expression for the spectator who was able to contemplate them coolly.

Each of them personified in himself those two races, whose struggle will only finish by the complete extinction of the one, to the profit of the other.

At their feet the combat was taking the gigantic proportions of an epic.

The Indians rushed with rage against the intrenchments, where the Americans received them with musket-shots or at the point of the bayonet.

But the fire continued to increase, the soldiers fell one after another; all promised soon to be over.

To the menace of White Eyes, the captain had replied by a smile of contempt.

Quick as lightning he discharged his pistol at the hunter; the latter let his gun drop.

The captain sprang upon him with a shout of joy.

The half-breed was knocked down by this shock.

Then his enemy placing his knee upon his breast, and looking at him for an instant, said, with a laugh—

"Well! was I mistaken?"

"No," the half-breed replied in a firm tone; "I am a fool—my life belongs to you—kill me!"

"Be satisfied I shall reserve you for an Indian death."

"You must be quick, then, if you wish to avenge yourself," the half-breed said, ironically, "for it will soon be too late."

"I have time enough. Why did you betray us, you miserable wretch?"

"Of what consequence is that to you?"

"I wish to know."

"Well then, be satisfied," the hunter said; "the white men, your brothers, were the murderers of all my family, and I wished to avenge them."

"But we had done nothing to you, had we?"

"Are you not white men? Kill me, and put an end to all this. I can die joyfully, for numbers of victims will follow me to the tomb."

"Well, since it is so," said the captain, with a sinister smile, "I will send you to join your brothers."

Then pressing his knees strongly on the chest of the hunter, to prevent his escape from the punishment he reserved for him, he cried—

"In the Indian fashion!"

And taking his knife, he seized with his left hand the half-breed's thick and tangled head of hair, and with the greatest dexterity scalped him.

The hunter could not restrain a cry of frightful agony at this unexpected mutilation. The blood flowed in torrents from his bare skull.

Kill me!" he said; "this is horrible!"

"Do you find it so?" said the captain.

"Oh! kill me! kill me!"

"What," said the captain, "do you take me for? No, I will restore you to your worthy friends."

He then took the hunter by the legs, and dragging him to the edge of the platform, pushed him with his foot.

The miserable creature instinctively endeavoured to hold himself up by seizing, with his left hand, the extremity of a post which projected outward.

For an instant he remained suspended in space.

He was hideous to behold; his denuded skull, his face, over which streams of black blood continued flowing, contracted by pain and terror; his whole body, agitated by convulsive movements, inspired horror and disgust.

"Pity! pity!" he murmured.

The captain surveyed him with a bitter smile.

But the exhausted nerves of the hunter could sustain him no longer; his clenched fingers relaxed their hold of the post he had seized with the energy of despair.

"Hangman! be for ever accursed!" he cried.

And he fell.

"A good journey to you!" said the captain.

An immense clamour arose from the gates of the fort.

The captain rushed to the assistance of his people.

The Comanches had gained the barricades.

They rushed in a crowd into the interior of the fort, massacring and scalping their enemies.

Four American soldiers only were left standing. The captain entrenched himself in the middle of the staircase which led to the platform.

"My friends," he said to his comrades, "die without regret, for I have killed the man who betrayed us."

The soldiers replied by a shout of joy to this novel consolation, and prepared to sell their lives dearly.

But at this moment the cries of the Indians ceased, as if by enchantment.

The attack was suspended.

"What are they about now?" the captain muttered; "what new devil's trick have these demons invented?"

Once master of all the approaches to the fort, Eagle Head ordered the fight to cease.

The colonists who were made prisoners in the village were brought, one after another, into his presence: there were twelve of them, and four were women.

When these twelve unfortunates stood before him, Eagle Head commanded the women to be set apart.

Ordering the men to pass one by one before him, he looked at them attentively, and then made a sign to the warriors standing by his side.

The latter instantly seized the Americans, chopped off their hands at the wrists with their knives, and, after having scalped them, pushed them into the fort.

Seven colonists underwent this atrocious torture, and there remained but one.

He was an old man of lofty stature, thin, but still active; his hair, white as snow, fell on his shoulders; his black eyes flashed, but his features remained unmoved; he waited, apparently impassible, till Eagle Head should decide his fate.

But the chief continued to survey him attentively.

At length the features of the savage expanded, a smile played upon his lips, and he held out his hand—

"*Usted no conocer amigo?*" (No you know friend?) he said to him in Spanish, with the guttural accent of his race.

"Oh!" said the old man, "El Gallo!" (the Cock).

"Wah!" replied the chief, "I am a friend of the grey-head; red-skins have not two hearts; my father saved my life—my father shall come to my hut."

"Thanks, chief! I accept your offer," said the old man, warmly pressing the hand the Indian held out.

And he hastily placed himself by a woman of middle age, with a noble countenance, whose features, though faded by grief, still preserved traces of great beauty.

"God be praised!" she said, with great emotion, when the old man rejoined her.

"God never abandons those who place their trust in Him," he replied.

During this time the red-skins were preparing the last scenes of the terrible drama.

When all the colonists were shut up in the fort, the fire was revived with all the materials the Indians could find; a barrier of flames for ever separated the unfortunate Americans from the world.

The fort soon became one immense funeral pyre, from which escaped cries of pain, mingled at intervals with the report of fire-arms.

The Comanches, motionless, watched at a distance the progress of the fire, and laughed like demons at the spectacle of their vengeance.

The flames, which had seized upon the whole building, mounted with fearful rapidity, throwing their light over the desert like a dismal beacon.

On the top of the fort some individuals were seen rushing about in despair, while others, on their knees, seemed to be imploring divine mercy.

Suddenly a horrible crackling was heard, a cry of extreme agony rose towards heaven, and the fort crumbled down into the burning pile which consumed it, throwing up millions of sparks.

All the Americans had perished.

The Comanches planted an enormous mast on the spot where the square had been. This mast, to which were nailed the hands of the colonists, was surmounted by a hatchet, the iron of which was stained with blood.

Then, after setting fire to the few cabins that were left standing, Eagle Head gave orders for departure.

The women and the old man, the sole survivors of the population of the settlement, followed the Comanches.

And a melancholy silence hovered over these smoking ruins, which had just been the theatre of so many sorrowful scenes.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PHANTOM.

It was about eight o'clock in the morning, a cheering autumn sun lit up the prairie splendidly.

Birds flew hither and thither, uttering strange cries, whilst others, concealed under the thickest of the foliage, poured forth melodious concerts. Now and then a deer raised its timid head above the tall grass, and then disappeared with a bound.

Two horsemen, clothed in the costume of wood-rangers, mounted upon magnificent half-wild horses, were following, at a brisk trot, the left bank of the great Canadian river, whilst several blood-hounds, with glossy black skins, and eyes and chests stained with red, ran and gambolled around them; they were Loyal Heart and Belhumeur.

Contrary to his usual deportment, Loyal Heart seemed affected by the most lively joy, his countenance beamed with cheerfulness, and he looked around him with complacency. Sometimes he would stop, and looked out ahead, appearing anxiously to seek in the horizon some object he could not yet discern. Then, with an expression of vexation, he resumed his journey, to repeat a hundred paces further on the same manœuvre.

"Ah, parbleu!" said Belhumeur, laughing, "we shall get there in good time. Be quiet, do!"

"Eh, *caramba!* I know that well enough; but I long to be there! For me, the only hours of happiness that God grants me, are passed with her whom we are going to see—my mother, my beloved mother! who gave up everything for me, abandoned all without regret, without hesitation. Oh, what happiness it is to have a mother! to possess one heart which understands yours, which makes a complete abnegation of self to absorb itself in you; which lives in your existence, rejoices in your joys, sorrows in your sorrows; which divides your life into two parts, reserving to itself the heaviest and leaving you the lightest and the most easy. Shall we never get there?"

"Well! here we are at the ford."

"I don't know why, but a secret fear has suddenly fallen upon my spirits."

"Oh, nonsense! In a few minutes we shall be with your mother."

"That is true! And yet I don't know whether I am mistaken, but it seems to me as if the country does not wear its usual aspect; this silence which reigns around us does not appear to be natural. We are close to the village, we ought already to hear the barking of the dogs, the crowing of the cocks, and the thousand noises that proclaim inhabited places."

"Well," said Belhumeur, with vague uneasiness, "I must confess that everything seems strangely silent."

The travellers came to a spot where the river makes a sharp curve; being deeply embanked, and skirted by immense blocks of rock and thick copse wood, it did not allow any extensive view.

The village towards which the travellers were directing their course, was scarcely a gun-shot from the ford where they were preparing to cross the river, but it was completely invisible, owing to the peculiar nature of the country.

At the moment the horses placed their feet in the water, they made a sudden movement backwards, and the bloodhounds uttered one of those plaintive howlings peculiar to their race, which freeze the bravest man with terror.

"What does this mean?" Loyal Heart exclaimed, turning pale as death.

"Look!" said Belhumeur, pointing with his finger to several dead bodies which the river was carrying away.

"Oh!" cried Loyal Heart, "something terrible has taken place here. My mother! my mother!"

"Do not alarm yourself so," said Belhumeur; "no doubt she is in safety."

Without listening to the consolations his friend poured out, though he did not believe in them himself, Loyal Heart drove the spurs into his horse's flanks, and sprang into the water.

They soon gained the opposite bank, and there all was explained. They had before them the most awful scene that can possibly be imagined. The village and the fort were a heap of ruins. A black, thick, sickening smoke ascended in long wreaths towards the heavens.

In the centre of what had been the village, arose a mast against which were nailed human fragments, for which *urubus* were contending with loud cries.

Here and there lay bodies half-devoured by wild beasts.

No living being appeared.

Nothing remained intact—everything was either broken, displaced, or overthrown. It was evident, at the first glance, that the Indians had passed there. Their steps were deeply imprinted in letters of fire and blood.

"Oh!" the hunter cried shuddering, "my presentiments were a warning from Heaven—my mother! my mother!"

Loyal Heart fell upon the ground in utter despair; he concealed his face in his hands and wept.

His sobs were like roarings, they rent his breast.

Belhumeur respected the grief of his friend—indeed what consolation could he offer him? It was better to allow his tears to flow, and give the first paroxysm of despair time to calm itself; certain that his unyielding nature could not long be cast down, and that a reaction would soon come, which would permit him to act.

Still, with that instinct innate to hunters, he began to look about in the hope of finding some indication which might serve to direct their researches.

After wandering for a long time about the ruins, he was suddenly attracted towards a large bush at a little distance from him by barkings which he thought he recognised.

He advanced towards it precipitately; a blood-hound like their own jumped up joyfully upon him, and covered him with wild caresses.

"Oh, oh!" said the hunter, "what does this mean? Who has tied poor Trim up in this fashion?"

He cut the rope which fastened the animal, and, in doing so, perceived that a piece of carefully folded paper was tied to its neck.

He seized it, and running to Loyal Heart, exclaimed—

"Brother! brother! Hope! hope!"

The hunter knew his brother was not a man to waste vulgar consolations upon him; he raised his tear-bathed face towards him.

As soon as it was free, the dog fled away with incredible velocity, baying with the dull, short yelps of a bloodhound following the scent.

Belhumeur, who had foreseen this flight, had hastened to tie his cravat round the animal's neck.

"No one knows what may happen," murmured the hunter, on seeing the dog disappear.

"What is the matter?" Loyal Heart asked.

"Read!" Belhumeur quietly replied.

The hunter seized the paper, which he read eagerly. It contained only these few words—

"We are prisoners of the red-skins. Courage! Nothing bad has happened to your mother."

"God be praised!" said Loyal Heart with great emotion, kissing the paper. "My mother still lives! Oh, I shall find her again!"

"Of course," said Belhumeur in a tone of conviction.

A complete change, as if by enchantment, had taken place in the mind of the hunter; he drew himself up to his full height, his face beaming with pleasure.

"Let us search," he said; "perhaps one of the unfortunate inhabitants has escaped death, and we may learn from him what has taken place."

"That's well," said Belhumeur joyfully; "that's the way. Let us search."

The dogs were scratching furiously among the ruins of the fort.

Both set to work to clear away the rubbish. They worked with an ardour incomprehensible to themselves. At the end of twenty minutes they discovered a sort of trap-door, and heard weak and inarticulate cries arise from beneath it.

"They are here," said Belhumeur.

"God grant we may be in time to save them."

It was not till after a length of time, and with infinite trouble, that they succeeded in raising the trap, and then a horrid spectacle presented itself.

In a cellar exhaling a fetid odour, a score of individuals were literally piled up one upon another.

Of all these men, one alone showed signs of life; all the rest were dead.

They dragged him out, laid him gently on a heap of dry leaves, and gave him every assistance in their power.

At the end of a few minutes the man made a slight movement, opened his eyes several times, and then breathed a profound sigh.

Belhumeur introduced between his clenched teeth the mouth of a leathern bottle filled with rum, and obliged him to swallow a few drops of the liquor.

"He is very bad," said the hunter.

"He is past recovery," Loyal Heart replied.

Nevertheless the wounded man revived a little.

"My God," said he, "I am dying!"

"Hope!" said Belhumeur, kindly.

A fugitive tinge passed across the pale cheeks of the wounded man, and a sad smile curled his lips.

"Why should I live?" he murmured. "The Indians have massacred all my companions, after having horribly mutilated them. Life would be too heavy a burden for me."

"If, before you die, you wish anything to be done that is in our power to do, speak, and we will do it."

The eyes of the dying man flashed faintly.

"Your gourd," he said to Belhumeur.

The latter gave it to him, and he drank greedily. His brow was covered with a moist perspiration, and a feverish redness inflamed his countenance, which assumed a frightful expression.

"Listen," said he, in a hoarse and broken voice. "I was commander here; the Indians, aided by a wretched half-breed, who sold us to them, surprised the village."

"The name of that man?" the hunter said, eagerly.

"He is dead—I killed him!" the captain replied, with an inexpressible accent of hatred and joy. "The Indians endeavoured to gain possession of the fort; the contest was terrible. We were twelve men against four hundred savages; what could we do? Fight to the death—that was what we resolved on doing. The Indians, finding the impossibility of taking us alive, cast the colonists of the village in among us, after cutting off their hands and scalping them, and then set fire to the fort."

The wounded man, whose voice grew weaker and weaker, and whose words were becoming unintelligible, swallowed a few more drops of the liquor, and then continued his recital.

"A cave, which served as a cellar, extended under the ditches of the fort. When I knew that all means of safety had escaped, and that flight was impossible, I led my unfortunate companions into this cave, hoping that God would permit us to be thus saved. A few minutes after, the fort fell down over us! No one can imagine the tortures we have suffered in this infected hole, without air or light. The cries of the wounded—and we were all so, more or less—screaming for water, and the rattle of the dying, formed a terrible concert that no pen can describe. How long did it last? I cannot tell. I was already sensible that the death which had carried off all my companions was about to take possession of me, when you came to retard it for a few minutes. God be praised! I shall not die without vengeance."

After these words, pronounced in a scarcely articulate voice, there was silence

among these three men—interrupted only by the dull rattle in the throat of the dying man, whose agony had begun.

All at once the captain made an effort; he raised himself, and fixing his eyes upon the hunters, said—

"The savages who attacked me belong to the Comanches; their chief is named Eagle Head; swear to avenge me."

"We swear to do so," the two men cried.

"Thanks," the captain murmured, and falling back, was dead.

His distorted features and his open eyes still preserved the expression of hatred and despair which had animated him to the last.

The hunters surveyed him for an instant, and then, shaking off this painful impression, they set about the duty of paying the last honours to the remains of the unfortunate victims of Indian rage.

By the last rays of the setting sun, they completed the melancholy task.

After a short rest, Loyal Heart arose, and saddling his horse, said—

"Now, brother, let us start on the trail of Eagle Head."

"Come on," the hunter replied.

The two men cast around them a farewell glance, and whistling their dogs, boldly entered the forest where the Comanches had disappeared.

At this moment the moon arose amidst an ocean of vapour, and profusely scattered her melancholy beams upon the ruins of the American village, in which solitude and death were doomed to reign for ever.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ENTRENCHED CAMP.

WE will leave the hunters following the track of the red-skins, and return to the general.

A few minutes after the two men had quitted the camp of the Mexicans, the general left his tent, and whilst casting an investigating look around him, and inhaling the fresh air of the morning, he began to walk about in a preoccupied manner.

The events of the night had produced a strong impression upon the old soldier.

For the first time, perhaps, since he had undertaken this expedition, he began to see it in its true light. He asked himself if he had really the right to associate with him in this life of continual perils and ambushes a girl of the age of his niece, whose existence up to that time had been an uninterrupted series of mild and peaceful emotions.

His perplexity was great. He adored his niece; she was his only object of love, his only consolation. For her he would, without regret or hesitation, a thousand times sacrifice all he possessed; but, on the other side, the reasons which had obliged him to undertake this perilous journey were of such importance that he trembled at the thought of renouncing it.

"What is to be done?" he said to himself. "What is to be done?"

Dona Luz, who was in her turn leaving her tent, perceived her uncle, whose reflective walk still continued, and, running towards him, threw her arms affectionately round his neck.

"Good day, uncle," she said, kissing him.

"Good day, my daughter," the general replied. He was accustomed to call her so. "Eh! eh! my child, you are very gay this morning."

And he returned the caresses she had lavished on him.

"Why should I not be gay, uncle? Thanks to God, we have just escaped a great peril; everything in nature seems to smile, the birds are singing upon every branch, the sun inundates us with warm rays; we should be ungrateful towards the Creator if we remained insensible to these manifestations of His goodness."

"Then the perils of last night have left no distressing impression upon your mind, my dear child?"

"None at all, uncle, except a deep sense of gratitude for the benefits God has favoured us with."

"That is well, my daughter," the general replied, joyfully. "I am happy to hear you speak thus."

"All the better, if it please you, uncle."

"Then," the general continued, "the life we are now leading is not fatiguing to you?"

"Oh, not at all; on the contrary, I find it very agreeable," she said, with a smile.

"Yes," the general continued; "but," he added, "I think we are too forgetful of our liberators."

"They are gone," Dona Luz replied.

"Gone?" the general said, with great surprise.

"Full an hour ago."

"How do you know that, my child?"

"Very simply, they bade me adieu before they left."

"That is not right," the general murmured in a tone of vexation; "a service is as binding upon those who bestow it as upon those who receive it; they should not have left us thus without bidding me farewell, without telling us whether we should ever see them again, and leaving us even unacquainted with their names."

"I know them."

"You know them, my daughter?" the general said.

"Yes, uncle; before they went they told me."

"And—what are they?" the general asked, eagerly.

"The younger is named Belhumeur."

"And the elder?"

"Loyal Heart."

"Oh! I must find these two men again," the general said, with an emotion he could not account for.

"Who knows?" the young girl replied, "perhaps at the first danger that threatens us they will make their appearance."

"God grant we may not owe their return among us to a similar cause."

The captain came up to pay the compliments of the morning.

"Well, captain," said the general, with a smile, "have you recovered from the effects of your alarm?"

"Perfectly, general," the young man replied, "and quite ready, whenever you please to give the order."

"After breakfast we will strike our tents; have the goodness to give the necessary orders to the lancers, and send the Babbler to me."

The captain bowed and retired.

"On your part, niece," the general continued, addressing Dona Luz, "superintend the preparations for breakfast, if you please, whilst I talk to our guide."

The young lady tripped away, and the Babbler entered. His air was dull, and his manner more reserved than usual.

The general took no notice of this.

"You remember," he said, "that you yesterday manifested an intention of finding a spot where we might conveniently encamp for a few days?"

"Yes, general."

"You told me you were acquainted with a situation that would perfectly suit our purpose?"

"Yes, general."

"What time will it require to gain this spot?"

"Two days."

"Very well. We will set out, then, immediately after breakfast."

The Babbler bowed without reply.

"By the way," the general said, with feigned indifference, "one of your men seems to be missing."

"Yes."

"What is become of him?"

"I do not know."

"How! you do not know?" said the general.

"No; as soon as he saw the fire, terror seized him, and he escaped."

"Very well!"

"He is most probably the victim of his cowardice."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The fire, most likely, has devoured him."

"Poor devil!"

A sardonic smile curled the lips of the guide.

"Have you anything more to say to me, general?"

"No—but stop."

"I attend your orders."

"Do you know the two hunters who rendered us such timely service?"

"We all know each other in the prairie."

"What are those men?"

"Hunters and trappers."

"That is not what I ask you."

"What then?"

"I mean as to their character."

"Oh!" said the guide, with an appearance of displeasure.

"Yes, their moral character."

"I don't know anything much about them."

"What are their names?"

"Belhumeur and Loyal Heart."

"And you know nothing of their lives?"

"Nothing."

"That will do—you may retire."

The guide bowed, and rejoined his companions.

"Hum!" the general murmured, as he looked after him, "I must keep a watch upon that fellow; there is something sinister in his manner."

After this aside, the general entered his tent, where the doctor, the captain, and Dona Luz were waiting breakfast for him.

Half an hour later the caravan was pursuing its journey under the direction of the Babbler, who rode about twenty paces in advance of the troop.

The aspect of the prairie was much changed since the preceding evening.

The black, burnt earth was covered in places with heaps of smoking ashes; here and there charred trees, still standing, displayed their saddening skeletons; the fire still roared at a distance, and clouds of coppery smoke obscured the horizon.

The horses advanced with precaution over this uneven ground, where they con-

stantly stumbled over the bones of animals that had fallen victims to the terrible embraces of the flames.

A melancholy sadness, much increased by the sight of the prospect unfolded before them, had taken possession of the travellers; they journeyed on, close to each other, without speaking, buried in their own reflections.

The day passed away thus, and excepting the fatigue which oppressed them, the monotony of the journey was not broken by any incident.

In the evening they encamped in a plain absolutely bare, but in the horizon they could perceive an appearance of verdure, which afforded them great consolation—they were about, at last, to enter a zone spared by the conflagration.

The next morning, two hours before sunrise, the Babbler gave orders to prepare for departure.

The day proved more fatiguing than the last; the travellers were literally worn out when they encamped.

The Babbler had not deceived the general. The site was admirably chosen to repel an attack of the Indians. It was the spot on which we met with the hunters, when they appeared on the scene for the first time.

The general, after casting around him the infallible glance of the experienced soldier, could not help manifesting his satisfaction.

"Bravo!" he said to the guide; "if we have had almost insurmountable difficulties to encounter in getting here, we could at least, if things should so fall out, sustain a siege on this spot."

The guide made no reply; he bowed with an equivocal smile, and retired.

"It is surprising," the general murmured to himself, "that although that man's conduct may be in appearance loyal, and however impossible it may be to approach him with the least thing—in spite of all that, I cannot divest myself of the presentiment that he is deceiving us.

The general was an old soldier of considerable experience, who would never leave anything to chance.

Notwithstanding the fatigue of his people, he would not lose a moment; aided by the captain, he had an enormous number of trees cut down, to form a solid entrenchment, protected by *chevaux de frise*. Behind this intrenchment the lancers dug a wide ditch, of which they threw out the earth on the side of the camp; and then, behind this second intrenchment the baggage was piled up, to make a third and last enclosure.

The tent was pitched in the centre of the camp, the sentinels were posted, and every one else went to seek that repose of which they stood so much in need.

The general, who intended sojourning on this spot for some time, wished, as far as it could be possible, to assure the safety of his companions.

For two days the travellers had been marching along execrable roads, almost without sleep, only stopping to snatch a morsel of food; they were quite worn out with fatigue. Notwithstanding, then, their desire to keep awake, the sentinels could not resist the sleep which overpowered them, and were soon in as complete forgetfulness as their companions.

Towards midnight, at the moment when every one in the camp was plunged in sleep, a man rose softly, and creeping along in the shade, with the quickness of a reptile, but with extreme precaution, glided out of the barricades and intrenchments.

He then went down upon the ground, and by degrees, in a manner almost insensibly, directed his course, upon his hands and knees, through the high grass towards a forest which covered the first ascent of the hill, and extended some way into the prairie.

When he had gone a certain distance, and was safe from discovery, he rose. A moonbeam threw a light upon his countenance.

That man was the Babblor.

He looked round anxiously, listened attentively, and then, with incredible perfection, imitated the cry of the prairie dog.

Almost instantly the same cry was repeated, and a man rose up, within at most ten paces of the Babblor.

This man was the guide who, three days before, had escaped from the camp.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BARGAIN.

INDIANS and wood-rangers have two languages, of which they make use by turns—spoken language, and the language of gestures.

Like the spoken language, the language of signs has infinite fluctuations; every one, so to say, invents his own. It is a compound of strange and mysterious gestures, a kind of masonic telegraph, the signs of which are only comprehensible to a small number.

The Babblor and his companion were conversing in signs.

This singular conversation lasted nearly an hour; it appeared to interest the speakers warmly; so warmly, indeed, that they did not remark, in spite of all the precautions they had taken not to be surprised, two fiery eyes that, from the middle of a tuft of underwood, were fixed upon them with strange intensesness.

At length the Babblor, risking the utterance of a few words, said, "I await your good pleasure."

"And you shall not wait it long," the other replied.

"I depend upon you, Kennedy; for my part, I have fulfilled my promise."

"That's well! We don't require many words to come to an understanding," said Kennedy, "only you need not have conducted them to so strong a position—it will not be very easy to surprise them."

"That's your concern," said the Babblor.

His companion looked at him for a moment with great attention.

"Hum!" said he; "beware, *compadre*; it is almost always awkward to play a double game with men like us."

"I am playing no double game; but I think you and I have known each other a pretty considerable time, Kennedy, have we not?"

"What follows?"

"What follows? Well! I am not disposed that a thing should happen that has happened before."

"Do you draw back, or are you thinking about betraying us?"

"I do not draw back, and I have not the least intention of betraying you, only——"

"Only?" the other repeated.

"This time I will not give up to you what I have promised till my conditions have been agreed to pretty plainly; if not, no——"

"Well, at least that's frank."

"People should speak plainly in business affairs," the Babblor observed.

"That's true! Well, come, repeat the conditions; I will see if we can accept them."

"What's the good of that? You are not the principal chief, are you?"

"No—but—yet——"

"You could pledge yourself to nothing—so it's of no use. If Waktehno—he who

kills—were here now, it would be quite another thing. He and I should soon understand one another."

"Speak then, he is listening to you," said a strong, sonorous voice.

There was a movement in the bushes, and the personage who, up to that moment, had remained an invisible hearer of the conversation of the two men, judged, without doubt, that the time to take a part in it was arrived, for, with a bound, he sprang out of the bushes that had concealed him, and placed himself between the speakers.

"Oh! oh! you were listening to us, Captain Waktehno, were you?" said the Babblers.

"Is that unpleasant to you?" the new comer asked, with an ironical smile.

"Oh! not the least in the world."

"Continue, then, my worthy friend—I am all ears."

"Well," said the guide, "it will, perhaps, be better so."

"Go on, then—speak; I attend to you."

The personage to whom the Babblers gave the terrible Indian name of Waktehno was a man of pure white race, thirty years of age, of lofty stature, and well proportioned, handsome in appearance, and wearing with a certain dashing carelessness the picturesque costume of the wood-rangers. His features were noble, strongly marked, and impressed with that loyal and haughty expression so often met with among men accustomed to the rude, free life of the prairies.

He fixed his large, black, brilliant eyes upon the Babblers, a smile curled his lips, and he leant carelessly upon his rifle whilst listening to the guide.

"If I cause the people I am paid to escort and conduct to fall into your hands, you may depend upon it I will not do so unless I am amply recompensed," said the bandit.

"That is but fair," Kennedy remarked; "and the captain is ready to assure your being so recompensed."

"Yes," said the other, nodding his head.

"Very well," the guide resumed. "But what will be my recompense?"

"What do you ask?" the captain said. "We must know what your conditions are before we agree to satisfy them."

"Oh! my terms are very moderate."

"Well, but what are they?"

The guide hesitated, or, rather, he calculated mentally the chances of gain and loss the affair offered.

"These Mexicans are very rich."

"Probably," said the captain.

"Therefore it appears to me——"

"Speak without tergiversation, Babblers; we have not time to listen to your circumlocutions. Like all half-bloods, the Indian nature always prevails in you, and you never come frankly to the purpose."

"Well, then," the guide bluntly replied, "I will have five thousand duros, or nothing shall be done."

"For once you speak out; now we know what we have to trust to; you demand five thousand dollars?"

"I do."

"And for that sum you agree to deliver up to us, the general, his niece, and all the individuals who accompany them."

"At your first signal."

"Very well! Now listen to what I am going to say to you. You know dependence is to be placed upon my word?"

"It is as good as gold."

"That's well. If you loyally fulfil the engagements you freely make with me,

that is to say, deliver up to me, not all the Mexicans who comprise your caravan—very respectable people no doubt, but for whom I care very little—but only the girl called, I think, Dona Luz, I will not give you five thousand dollars as you ask, but eight thousand—you understand me, do you not?”

The eyes of the guide sparkled with greediness.

“Yes!” he said emphatically. “But it will be a difficult matter to draw her out of the camp alone.”

“That’s your affair.”

“I should prefer giving them all up in a lump.”

“Go to the devil! What could I do with them?”

“Hum! what will the general say?”

“What he likes; that is nothing to me. Yes or no—do you accept the offer I make you?”

“Oh! I accept it.”

“Well, I give you nine days; that is to say, on the eve of their departure the young girl must be given up to me.”

“Oh! in that way——”

“Then that arrangement suits you?”

“It could not be better.”

“Is it agreed?”

“Irrevocably.”

“Here, then, Babbler,” said the captain, giving the guide a magnificent diamond pin, “here is my earnest.”

“Oh!” the bandit exclaimed, seizing the jewel joyfully.

“That pin,” said the captain, “is a present I make you in addition to the eight thousand dollars I will hand over to you on receiving Dona Luz.”

“You are noble and generous, captain,” said the guide; “it is a pleasure to serve you.”

“Still,” the captain rejoined, in a rough voice, “I would have you remember I am called He Who Kills; and that if you deceive me, there does not exist in the prairie a place sufficiently strong or sufficiently remote to protect you from the terrible effects of my vengeance.”

“I know that, captain,” said the half-breed; “you may be quite satisfied I will not deceive.”

“I hope you will not! Now let us separate. In nine days I shall be here.”

“In nine days I will place the girl in your hands.”

After these words the guide returned to the camp, which he entered without being seen.

As soon as they were alone, the two men with whom the Babbler had just made this hideous and strange bargain retreated silently among the underwood, through which they crawled like serpents.

They soon reached the banks of a little rivulet which ran, unperceived and unknown, through the forest. Kennedy whistled in a certain fashion twice.

A slight noise was heard, and a horseman, holding two horses, appeared at a few paces.

“Come on, Frank,” said Kennedy, “you may approach without fear.”

The horseman immediately advanced.

“What is there new?” Kennedy asked.

“Nothing very important,” the horseman replied. “I have discovered an Indian trail.”

“In what direction?”

“It cuts the prairie from east to west.”

“Well done, Frank; and who are these Indians?”

"As well as I can make out, they are Comanches."

"Frank and you, Kennedy," said the captain, at the expiration of a minute, "will go to the passage of the Buffalo, and encamp in the grotto which is there; carefully watching the movements of the Mexicans, but in such a manner as not to be discovered."

"Be satisfied of that, captain."

"Oh; I know you are very adroit and devoted comrades, therefore I perfectly rely upon you. Watch the Babbler, likewise; that half-breed only inspires me with moderate confidence."

"That shall be done!"

"Farewell, then, till we meet again. You shall soon hear of me."

Notwithstanding the darkness, the three men set off at a gallop in two different directions.

CHAPTER XVI.

PSYCHOLOGICAL.

THE general had kept the causes which made him undertake a journey into the prairies so profound a secret, that the persons who accompanied him had not even a suspicion of them.

Several times already, at his command, and without any apparent reason, the caravan had encamped in regions completely desert, where he had passed a week, and sometimes a fortnight, without any apparent motive for such a halt.

On these various occasions the general would set out every morning, attended by one of the guides, and not return till evening.

What was he doing during the long hours of his absence? With what object were these explorations made, at the end of which a greater degree of sadness darkened his countenance?

No one knew.

During these excursions, Dona Luz led a sufficiently monotonous life, isolated among the rude people who surrounded her. She passed whole days seated sadly in front of her tent, or, mounted on horseback, escorted by Captain Aguilar, or the fat doctor, took rides near the camp, without object or interest.

It happened this time again, exactly as it had happened at the preceding stations of the caravan.

The young girl, abandoned by her uncle, and even by the doctor, who was pursuing, with increasing ardour, the great search for his fantastic plant, and set out resolutely every morning herbalising, was reduced to the company of Captain Aguilar.

But Captain Aguilar was, although young, elegant, and endowed with some intelligence, not a very amusing companion.

A brave soldier, with the courage of a lion, entirely devoted to the general, to whom he owed everything, the captain entertained for the niece of his chief great attachment and respect; he watched with the utmost care over her safety, but he was completely unacquainted with the means of rendering the time shorter by those attentions and that pleasant chat which are so agreeable to girls.

Dona Luz was not so *ennuyée* as usual. Since that terrible night—from the time that, like one of those fabulous heroes whose history and incredible feats she had so often read, Loyal Heart had appeared to her to save her and those who accompanied her—a new sentiment, which she had not even thought of analysing, had germinated

in her maiden heart, had grown by degrees, and in a very few days had taken possession of her whole being.

The image of the hunter was incessantly present to her thought, encircled with that glory which is won by the energy of the man who struggles, with some immense danger, and forces it to acknowledge his superiority. She took delight in recalling to her mind the different scenes of that tragedy of a few hours, in which the hunter had played the principal character.

Her memory, like that of all pure young girls, retraced with incredible fidelity the smallest details.

In a word, she reconstructed in her thoughts the series of events in which the hunter had mingled, and in which he had, thanks to his indomitable courage and presence of mind, extricated in so happy a fashion those he had suddenly come to succour, at the instant when they were without hope.

The hurried manner in which the hunter had left them, disdaining the most simple thanks, and appearing even unconcerned for those he had saved, had vexed the girl; she was piqued more than can be imagined by this real or affected indifference; And, consequently, she continually revolved means to make her preserver, if possible, repent that indifference.

It is a well-known paradox, that from hatred, or, at least, from curiosity to love, there is but one step, and Dona Luz passed it at full speed.

Dona Luz had been educated in a convent, at the gates of which the sounds of the world died away. Her youth had passed calm and colourless, in the religious, or, rather, superstitious practices, upon which in Mexico religion is built. When her uncle took her from the convent to take her with him through the journey he meditated into the prairies, the girl was ignorant of the most simple exigencies of life, and had no more idea of the outward world, in which she was so suddenly cast, than a blind man has of the splendour of the sun's beams.

This ignorance, which suited the projects of the uncle, was for the niece a stumbling-block against which she twenty times a day came into collision.

But, thanks to the care with which the general surrounded her, the few weeks which passed away before their departure from Mexico had been spent without too much pain by the young girl.

We feel called upon, however, to notice here an incident, trifling in appearance, but which left too deep a trace in the mind of Dona Luz not to be related.

The general was actively employed in getting together the people he wanted, and was obliged to neglect his niece more than he would have wished.

As he, however, feared that the young girl would be unhappy at being left so much alone with an old duenna in the palace he occupied, in the Calle de los Plateros, he sent her frequently to spend her evenings at the house of a female relation who received a select society.

Now one evening, when the assembly had been more numerous than usual, it did not break up till late.

At the first stroke of eleven, sounded by the ancient clock of the convent of the Merced, Dona Luz and her duenna, preceded by a peon carrying a torch, set off on their return home, casting anxious looks right and left. They had but a short distance to go, when all at once, on turning the corner of the Calle San Agustin to enter that of Plateros, four or five men of evil appearance seemed to rise from the earth, and surrounded the two women, after having previously, by a vigorous blow, extinguished the torch carried by the peon.

To express the terror of the young lady at this unexpected apparition is impossible.

She was so frightened that, without having the strength to utter a cry, she fell on her knees, with her hands clasped, before the bandits.

The duenna, on the contrary, sent forth deafening screams.

The Mexican bandits, all very expeditious men, had, in the shortest time possible, reduced the duenna to silence, by gagging her with her own rebozo; then, with all the calmness which these worthies bring to the exercise of their functions, assured of impunity by that justice with which they generally go halves, proceeded to plunder their victims.

The operation was shortened by the latter, for, so far from offering any resistance, they tore off their jewels in the greatest haste, and the bandits pocketed them with grins of satisfaction.

But suddenly a sword gleamed over their heads, and two of the bandits fell to the ground, swearing and howling.

Those who were left standing, enraged at this unaccustomed attack, turned to avenge their companions, and rushed all together upon the aggressor.

The latter, heedless of their number, made a step backwards, and placed himself on guard.

But, with the change in his position, the moonlight fell upon his face. The bandits instantly drew back in terror, and promptly sheathed their machetes.

"Ah, ah!" said the stranger, with a smile of contempt, as he advanced towards them, "you recognise me, my masters, do you? By the Virgin! I am sorry for it—I was preparing to give you a rather sharp lesson. Is this the manner in which you execute my orders?"

The bandits remained silent, contrite and repentant, in appearance at least.

"Come, empty your pockets, you paltry thieves, and restore to these ladies what you have taken!"

Without a moment's delay, the thieves unbandaged the duenna, and restored the booty, which, an instant before, they had so joyfully appropriated.

Dona Luz could not overcome her astonishment, she looked with the greatest surprise at this strange man, who possessed such authority over bandits acknowledging neither faith nor law.

"Is this really all?" he said, addressing the young lady; "are you sure you miss nothing, senora?"

"Nothing—nothing, sir!" she replied.

"Now, then, begone, you scoundrels," the stranger continued; "I will take upon myself to be the escort of these ladies."

The bandits did not require to be twice told; they disappeared, carrying off the wounded.

As soon as he was left alone with the two women, the stranger turned towards Dona Luz—

"Permit me, senorita," he said, with refined courtesy of manner, "to offer you my arm as far as your palace; the fright you have just experienced must render your steps uncertain."

Mechanically, and without reply, the young girl placed her hand within the arm so courteously offered.

When they arrived at the palace, the stranger knocked at the door, and then taking off his hat, said—

"Senorita, I am happy that chance has enabled me to render you a slight service. I shall have the honour of seeing you again. I have already, for a long time, followed your steps like your shadow. God, who has granted me the favour of an opportunity of speaking with you once, will, I feel assured, grant me a second, although, in a few days, you are to set out on a long journey. Permit me then to say not *adieu*, but *au revoir*."

After bowing humbly and gracefully to the young lady, he departed at a rapid pace.

A fortnight after this strange adventure, of which she did not speak to her uncle,

Dona Luz quitted Mexico, without having again seen the unknown. Only, on the eve of her departure, when retiring to her bed-chamber, she found a folded note, upon her *prie dieu*. In this note were the following words, written in an elegant hand—

“You are going, Dona Luz! Remember that I told you I should see you again.

“Your preserver of the Calle de los Plateros.”

For a long time this strange meeting strongly occupied the mind of the young girl; for an instant, she had even believed that Loyal Heart and her unknown preserver were the same man; but what probability was there in it? Would Loyal Heart, after having saved her, so quickly have departed?

But, by one of those strange consequences of the human mind, in proportion as the affair of Mexico was effaced from her thoughts, that of Loyal Heart became more prominent.

She longed to see the hunter and talk with him.

Why? She did not herself know. To see him—to hear his voice—to meet his look, at once so soft and so proud—nothing else; all maidens are the same.

In reply to the question “How to see him again?” arose an impossibility, before which the poor girl dropped her head with discouragement.

And yet something at the bottom of her heart, perhaps that voice divine which in the secret depths of their hearts whispers of love to young girls, told her that her wish would soon be accomplished.

She hoped, then, for some unforeseen incident—some terrible danger—which might reunite them.

True love may doubt sometimes, but it never despairs.

Four days after the establishment of the camp upon the hill, in the evening, when retiring to her tent, Dona Luz smiled inwardly as she looked at her uncle, who was pensively preparing to go to rest.

She had at length thought of a means of going in search of Loyal Heart.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BEB-HUNT.

THE sun was scarcely above the horizon, when the general, whose horse was already saddled, left the reed cabin which served him as a sleeping-apartment, and prepared to set out on his usual daily ride. As he was putting his foot in the stirrup, a little hand lifted the curtain of the tent, and Dona Luz appeared.

“Oh! oh! what, up already!” said the general, smiling. “So much the better, dear child. I shall be able to have a kiss before I set out; and that perhaps may bring me good luck,” he added, stifling a sigh.

“You will not go thus, uncle,” she replied, presenting her cheek, upon which he placed a kiss.

“Why not, fair lady?” he asked gaily.

“Because I wish you to partake of something I have prepared for you; you cannot refuse me, can you, dear uncle?” she said, with that coaxing smile which delights the hearts of old men.

“Certainly not, dear child, upon condition that the breakfast you offer me be not delayed. I am in a hurry.”

“I only ask for a few minutes,” she replied, returning to the tent.

"For a few minutes be it then," said he, following her.

The young girl clapped her hands with joy.

In the twinkling of an eye, the breakfast was ready, and the general at table with his niece. Whilst assisting her uncle, and taking great care that he wanted for nothing, the young girl looked at him from time to time in an embarrassed manner, and did it so evidently, that the old soldier ended by observing it.

"It is my opinion," he said, laying down his knife and fork, "that you have something to ask me, Lucita; you know very well that I am not accustomed to refuse you anything."

"That is true, dear uncle; but this time, I am afraid, you will be more difficult to be prevailed upon."

"Ah! ah!" the general said, gaily; "it must be something serious, then!"

"Quite the contrary, uncle; and yet, I confess, I am afraid you will refuse me."

"Speak, notwithstanding, my child," said the old soldier; "speak without fear; when you have told me what this mighty affair is, I will soon answer you."

"Well, uncle," the girl said, blushing, but determined on her purpose, "I am compelled to say that the residence in the camp is very dull."

"I can conceive that, my child; but what do you wish me to do to make it otherwise?"

"If you were always here, dear uncle, it would not be dull; I should have your company."

"What you say is very amiable; but, as you know I am absent every morning, I cannot be here, and——"

"But, if you were willing, it could be easily removed."

"Well, I don't see too clearly how, unless I remained always with you, and that is impossible."

"Oh; there are other means that would arrange the whole affair."

"Well, then, darling, what are these means?"

"That you should take me with you every morning."

"Oh! oh!" said the general frowning; "do you know what you ask me, my dear child?"

"Why, a very natural thing, uncle, as I think."

The general made no reply; he reflected. The girl watched anxiously the fugitive traces of his thoughts.

At the end of a few instants, he raised his head.

"Well, perhaps it would be better so;" and fixing a piercing look upon his niece, he said, "it would give you pleasure, then, to accompany me?"

"Yes, uncle, yes!" she replied.

"Well, then, get ready, my dear child; henceforth you shall accompany me in my excursions."

She arose from her seat with a bound, kissed her uncle warmly, and ordered her horse.

A quarter of an hour later, Dona Luz and her uncle, preceded by the Babbler, and followed by two lanceros, quitted the camp, and plunged into the forest.

"Which way would you wish to direct your course to-day, general?" the guide asked.

"Conduct me to the huts of those trappers you spoke of yesterday."

The guide bowed in sign of obedience. The little party advanced slowly and with some difficulty along a scarcely-traced path, where, at every step, the horses became entangled in the creeping plants, or stumbled over the roots of trees above the level of the ground.

Dona Luz was gay and happy. Perhaps in these excursions she might meet with Loyal Heart.

The Babbler, who was a few paces in advance, suddenly uttered a cry.

"Eh!" said the general, "what extraordinary thing has happened, Master Babbler, to induce you to speak?"

"The bees, senor."

"What! bees! are there bees here?"

"Yes; but lately only."

"How only lately?"

"Why, you know, of course, that bees were brought into America by the whites."

"That I know. How is it, then, they are met with here?"

"The bees are simply the advanced sentinels of the whites. In proportion as the whites penetrate into the interior of America, the bees go forward to trace the route for them, and point out the clearings. Their appearance in an uninhabited country always presages the arrival of a colony of pioneers or squatters."

"This is strange," the general murmured; "are you sure of what you are telling me?"

"Oh! quite sure, senor; the fact is well known to all Indians: they are not mistaken in it, be assured; for as soon as they see the bees arrive, they retreat."

"That is truly singular."

"The honey must be very good," said Doná Luz.

"Excellent, senorita, and if you wish for it, nothing is more easy than to get it."

"Get some, then," said the general.

The guide, who some moments before had placed a bait for the bees upon the bushes, to which, with his piercing sight, he had already seen several bees attracted, made a sign to those behind him to stop.

The bees had, in fact, lighted upon the bait, and were examining it all over; when they had extracted what they needed, they rose very high into the air, and took flight in a direct line with the velocity of a cannon ball.

The guide carefully watched the direction they took, and making a sign to the general, he sprang after them, followed by the whole party, clearing themselves a way through interlaced roots, fallen trees, bushes and briars, their eyes directed all the while towards the sky.

In this fashion they never lost sight of the bees, and after a difficult pursuit of an hour, they saw them arrive at their nest, constructed in the hollow of a dead ebony tree; after buzzing for a moment, they entered a hole situated at more than eighty feet from the ground.

Then the guide, after having warned his companions to keep at a respectful distance, in order to be out of the way of the falling tree and the vengeance of its inhabitants, seized his axe and attacked the ebony vigorously near the base.

The bees did not seem at all alarmed by the stroke of the axe; they continued going in and out, carrying on their industrial labours in full security. A violent cracking even, which announced the splitting of the trunk, did not divert them from their occupations.

At length the tree fell, with a horrible crash, opening the whole of its length, and leaving the accumulated treasures of the community exposed to view.

The guide immediately seized a bundle of hay which he had prepared, and to which he set fire to defend himself; but they attacked nobody; they did not seek to avenge themselves. The poor creatures were stupefied; they flew in all directions round their destroyed empire, without thinking of anything but how to account for this unlooked-for catastrophe.

Then the men set to work with spoons and knives to get out the comb and fill the wine-skins.

Some of the comb was of a deep brown, and of ancient date, other parts were of a beautiful white; the honey in the cells was almost limpid.

Whilst they were hastening to get possession of the best combs, they saw arrive on the wing from all points of the horizon numberless swarms of honey-bees, who, plunging into the broken cells, loaded themselves, while the ex-proprietors of the hive, dull and stupefied, looked on, without seeking to save the least morsel, at the robbery of their honey.

It is impossible to describe the astonishment of the bees that were absent at the moment of the catastrophe, as they arrived at their late home with their cargoes; they described circles in the air round the place the tree had occupied, astonished to find it empty; at length, however, they seemed to comprehend their disaster, and collected in groups upon the dried branch of a neighbouring tree, appearing to contemplate thence the fallen ruin.

"Let us go," said Dona Luz, affected in spite of herself; "I repent of having wished for honey; my greediness has made too many unhappy."

"I let us be gone," said the general, smiling; "leave them these few combs."

"Oh!" said the guide, shrugging his shoulders, "they will soon be carried away by the vermin."

"The vermin! What vermin do you mean?"

"Oh! the racoons, the opossums, but particularly the bears."

"The bears?" said Dona Luz.

"Oh, senorita!" the guide replied, "they are the cleverest vermin in the world in discovering a tree of bees, and getting their share of the honey."

"Do they like honey, then?" said the lady.

"Why, they are mad after it, senorita," the guide, who really seemed to relax of his cynical humour, rejoined. "Imagine how greedy they are after it, when they will gnaw a tree for weeks, until they succeed in making a hole large enough to put their paws in, and then they carry off honey and bees."

"Now," said the general, "let us resume our route, and seek the residence of the trappers."

"We shall soon be there, senor," replied the guide; "yonder is the great Canadian river, and trappers are established all along the stream."

The little party proceeded on their way again.

The bee-hunt had left an impression of sadness on the mind of the young lady, which she could not overcome. Those poor little creatures, so gentle and so industrious, attacked and ruined for a caprice, grieved her, and made her thoughtful.

Her uncle perceived this disposition of her mind.

"Dear child!" he said, "what is passing in your head? You are no longer so gay as when we set out."

"Do not let that disturb you, uncle; I am, like other young girls, rather wild and whimsical; this bee-hunt, from which I promised myself so much pleasure, has left a sadness behind it I cannot get rid of."

"Happy child!" the general murmured, "whom so futile a cause has still the power to trouble. God grant, darling, that you may continue long in that disposition, and that greater and more real troubles may never reach you!"

"My kind uncle, shall I not always be happy while near you?"

"Alas! my child, who knows whether God may permit me to watch over you long!"

"Do not say so, uncle; I hope we have many years to pass together."

The general was preparing to answer her, when the guide, suddenly coming up to them, made a sign to command silence, by saying, in a voice as low as a breath—

"A man!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

BLACK ELK.

EVERY one stopped.

In the desert this word man almost always means an enemy. Man in the prairie is more dreaded by his fellow than the most ferocious wild beast. A man is a rival, a forced associate, who, by the right of being the stronger, comes to share with the first occupant, and often, if we may not say always, strives to deprive him of the fruits of his thankless labour.

Thus, whites, Indians, or half-breeds, when they meet in the prairies, salute each other with eye on the watch, ears open, and the finger on the trigger.

At this cry of a man, the general and the lanceros, at all hazards, prepared against a sudden attack by cocking their guns, and concealing themselves as much as possible behind the bushes.

At fifty paces before them stood an individual, who, his two hands leaning on the barrel of a long rifle, was observing them attentively.

He was a man of lofty stature, energetic features, and a frank, determined look. His long hair, arranged with care, was plaited, mingled with otter skins and ribbons of various colours. A hunting-blouse of ornamented leather fell to his knees; gaiters of a singular cut, with strings, fringes, and a profusion of little bells covered his legs; his shoes consisted of a pair of superb mocassins, embroidered with false pearls.

A scarlet blanket hung from his shoulders, and was fastened round his middle by a red belt, through which were passed two pistols, a knife, and an Indian pipe.

His rifle was profusely decorated with vermilion and little copper nails.

At a few paces from him his horse was browsing on the mast of the trees.

Like its master, it was equipped in the most fantastic manner, spotted and striped with vermilion, the reins and crupper ornamented with beads and bunches of ribbon, while its head, mane, and tail, were abundantly decorated with eagle's feathers floating in the wind.

At sight of this personage the general could not restrain a cry of surprise.

"To what Indian tribe does this man belong?" he asked the guide.

"To none," he replied; "he is a white trapper."

"And so dressed?"

The guide shrugged his shoulders.

"We are in the prairies," he said.

"That is true," the general murmured.

In the meantime, the individual we have described, tired, no doubt, of the hesitation of the little party before him, and wishing to know what their disposition was, resolutely accosted them.

"Eh! eh!" he said in English. "Who the devil are you—and what do you want here?"

"*Caramba!*" the general replied, throwing his gun behind him, and ordering his people to do the same; "we are travellers, fatigued with a long journey; the sun is hot, and we ask permission to rest a short time in your rancho."

These words being spoken in Spanish, the trapper replied in the same language—

"Approach without fear; Black Elk is a good sort of fellow when people do not thwart him; you can share the little he possesses, and much good may it do you."

At the name of Black Elk the guide could not repress a movement of terror; he wished even to say a few words, but he had not time, for the hunter, throwing his gun

upon his shoulder, and leaping into his saddle with a bound, advanced towards the Mexicans.

"My rancho is a few paces from this spot," said he; "if the *senorita* is inclined to taste a well-seasoned hump of buffalo, I am in a position to offer it to her."

"I thank you, *caballero*," the young lady replied, with a smile; "but I confess that at this moment I stand in more need of repose than anything else."

"Everything will come in its time," the trapper said sententiously. "Permit me, for a few moments, to take the place of your guide."

"We are at your orders," said the general.

"Forward! then," said the trapper, placing himself at the head of the little troop.

At this moment his eyes fell upon the guide—his eyebrows contracted. "Hum!" he muttered to himself, "what does this mean? We shall see," he added.

And without taking further notice of the man, without appearing to recognise him, he gave the signal for departure.

After riding for some time silently along the banks of a moderately wide rivulet the trapper made a sharp turn, and plunged again into the forest.

"I crave your pardon," he said, "for making you turn out of your way; but this is a beaver pond, and I do not wish to frighten them."

"Oh!" the young lady cried, "how delighted I should be to see those industrious animals at work!"

"Nothing more easy, *senorita*," said the trapper, "if you will follow me, while your companions remain here, and wait for us."

"Yes, yes!" *Dona Luz* replied eagerly; then checking herself, added, "Oh, pardon me, dear uncle."

The general cast a look at the trapper.

"Go, my child," he said, "we will wait for you here."

"Thank you, uncle," the young girl remarked joyfully, as she leaped from her horse.

"I will be answerable for her," the trapper said frankly; "fear nothing."

"I fear nothing when trusting her to your care, my friend," the general replied.

"Thanks!" And making a sign to *Dona Luz*, Black Elk disappeared with her among the bushes.

When they had gone some distance, the trapper stopped. After listening and looking around him on all sides, he stooped towards the young girl, and laying his hand lightly on her right arm, said—

"Listen!"

Dona Luz stood still, uneasy and trembling.

The trapper perceived her agitation.

"Be not afraid," he rejoined; "I am an honest man; you are in as much safety here alone with me in this desert as if you were in the Cathedral of Mexico, at the foot of the high altar."

The young girl cast a furtive glance at the trapper. In spite of his singular costume, his face wore such an expression of frankness, his eye was so soft and limpid, that she felt completely reassured.

"Speak!" she said.

"You belong," the trapper resumed, "I perceive, to that party of strangers who, for some days past, have been exploring the prairies in every direction."

"Yes."

"Among you is a sort of madman, who wears blue spectacles and a white wig, and who amuses himself—for what purpose I cannot tell—with making a provision of herbs and stones, instead of trying, like a brave hunter, to trap a beaver, or a hawk over a deer."

"I know the man you speak of; he is a very learned physician."

"I know he is; he told me so himself. He often comes this way. We are very good friends. By means of a powder, which he persuaded me to take, he completely checked a fever which had tormented me two months, and of which I could not get rid."

"Indeed! I am happy to hear of such a result."

"I should like to do something for you, to show my gratitude for that service."

"I thank you, my friend, but I cannot see anything in which you can be useful to me, unless it be in showing me the beavers."

The trapper shook his head.

"Perhaps in something else," he said, "and that much sooner than you may fancy. Listen to me attentively, seniorita. I am but a poor man; but here in the prairie, we know many things that God reveals to us, because we live face to face with Him. I will give you a piece of good advice. That man who serves you as a guide is an arrant scoundrel. I am very much deceived if he will not lead you into some ambush. There is no lack here of plenty of rogues with whom he may lay plans to destroy you, or at least rob you."

"Are you sure of what you say?" the girl exclaimed, terrified at words which coincided so strangely with what Loyal Heart had said to her.

"I am as sure as a man can be; that is to say, after the antecedents of the Babbler, everything of the sort must be expected from him. Believe me, if he has not already betrayed you, it will not be long before he will."

"Good God! I will go and warn my uncle."

"Beware of doing that! that would ruin all. The people with whom your guide will soon be in collusion, if he be not so already, are numerous, determined, and thoroughly acquainted with the prairie."

"What is to be done, then?" the young lady asked.

"Nothing. Wait; and, without appearing to do so, carefully watch all your guide's proceedings."

"But——"

"You must be sure," the trapper interrupted, "that if I lead you to mistrust him, it is not with a view of deserting you when the right moment comes."

"Oh! I believe that."

"Well, then, this is what you must do: as soon as you are certain that your guide has betrayed you, send your old mad doctor to me—you can trust him, can you not?"

"Entirely!"

"Very well. Then, as I have said, you must send him to me, charging him to only to say this to me, 'Black Elk'—I am Black Elk."

"I know you are; you told us so."

"That is right. He will say to me, 'Black Elk, the hour is come,' and nothing else. Shall you remember?"

"Perfectly. Only, I do not clearly understand how that can serve us."

The trapper smiled in a mysterious manner.

"Hum!" he said, after a short pause; "these few words will bring to you, in two hours, fifty men, the bravest in the prairies—men who, at a signal from their leader, would allow themselves to be killed rather than leave you in the hands of those who will have possession of you, if what I expect should happen."

There was a moment of silence—Dona Luz appeared very thoughtful.

The trapper smiled.

"Do not be surprised at the warm interest I take in you," he said; "a man I love has made me swear to watch over you during his absence."

"What do you mean by that?" she said with awakened curiosity. "And who is this man?"

"He is a hunter who commands all the white trappers of the prairies. Knowing that you had the Babblers for a guide, he suspects that the half-breed intends to draw you into some snare."

"But the name of the man?" she cried, in an anxious, excited tone.

"Loyal Heart. Will you have confidence now?"

"Thanks, my friend!" the young lady replied, warmly. "I will not forget your instructions; and when the moment comes—should it ever come—I will not hesitate to remind you of your promise."

"And you will do well, *senorita*, because it will then be the only means of safety left you. You understand me perfectly, and all is well. Be sure to keep our conversation to yourself. Above all, do not appear to have any secret understanding with me; that half-breed is as cunning as a beaver; if he suspect anything, he will slip through our fingers, like the viper he is."

"Be satisfied; I will be mute."

"Now let us pursue our way to the Beaver Pond. Loyal Heart watches over you."

"He has already saved our lives on the occasion of the prairie fire," she said with emotion.

"Ah! ah!" the trapper murmured, fixing his eyes upon her with a singular expression, "everything is for the best, then." And he added in a loud voice, "Be without fear, *senorita*, if you follow strictly the advice I have given you, no evil will happen to you in the prairies."

"Oh!" the girl cried, "in the hour of danger I will not hesitate to have recourse to you."

"That is settled," said the Black Elk, smiling; "now let us go and see the beavers."

They resumed their walk, and at the end of a few minutes arrived on the verge of the forest, when the trapper bade her look.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BEAVERS.

DONA LUZ pushed aside the branches of the willows and bending her head forward, surveyed the scene.

The beavers had not only intercepted the course of the river, but all the rivulets that ran into it had their courses stopped, so as to transform the surrounding ground into one vast marsh.

One beaver alone was at work, at the moment, on the principal dam; but very shortly five others appeared, carrying pieces of wood, mud, and bushes. They then all directed their course towards a part of the barrier which, as the lady could perceive, needed repair. They deposited their load on the broken part, and plunged into the water, but only to reappear almost instantly on the surface.

Each brought up a certain quantity of slimy mud, which they employed as mortar to join and render firm the pieces of wood and the bushes; they went away and returned again with more wood and mud; in short, this work of masonry was carried on till the breach had entirely disappeared.

As soon as all was in order, the industrious animals enjoyed a moment's recreation; they pursued each other in the pond, plunged to the bottom of the water, reappeared on the surface, striking the water noisily with their tails.

Whilst the first were amusing themselves thus, two other members of the community appeared. For some time they looked gravely on at the sports of their companions, without showing any inclination to join them; then climbing up the steep bank not far from the spot where the trapper and the young girl were watching, they seated themselves upon their hind paws, leaning the fore ones upon a young pine, and beginning to gnaw the bark of it. Sometimes they detached a small piece, and held it between their paws, still remaining seated; they nibbled it with contortions and grimaces pretty much resembling those of a monkey shelling a walnut.

The evident object of these beavers was to cut down the tree, and they laboured at it earnestly. It was a young pine of about eighteen inches in diameter at the part where they attacked it, as straight as an arrow, and of considerable height. No doubt they would soon have succeeded in cutting it through; but the general, uneasy at the prolonged absence of his niece, made up his mind to go in search of her, and the beavers, terrified at the noise of the horses, dived into the water and disappeared.

The general reproached his niece gently for her long absence; but she, delighted with what she had seen, did not heed him, and promised herself often to be a spectator of the proceedings of the beavers.

The little party, under the direction of the trapper, directed their course towards the rancho, in which he had offered them shelter from the burning rays of the sun, which was now at its zenith.

The travellers soon reached a miserable hut, made of interlaced branches of trees, scarcely capable of sheltering them from the rays of the sun, and in every respect resembling, as regarded convenience, those of other trappers of the prairies, who are men that trouble themselves the least about the comforts of life.

Nevertheless, such as it was, Black Elk did the honours of it very warmly to the strangers.

A second trapper was squatting before the hut, occupied in watching the roasting of the buffalo's hump which Black Elk had promised his guests.

This man, whose costume was in all respects like that of Black Elk, was scarcely forty years old; but the fatigue and miseries of his hard profession had dug upon his face such a net-work of inextricable wrinkles as made him look older than he was.

In fact, there does not exist in the world a more dangerous, more painful, or less profitable trade than that of a trapper. These poor people are often, whether by Indians or hunters, robbed of their hardly-earned gains, scalped, and massacred, and no one troubles himself to learn what has become of them.

"Take your place, *senorita*; and you also, gentlemen," said Black Elk, politely. "However poor my hut may be, it is large enough to contain you all."

The travellers cheerfully accepted his invitation; they alighted from their horses, and were soon stretched comfortably upon beds of dry leaves, covered with the skins of bears, elks, and buffaloes.

The repast—truly a hunter's repast—was washed down with some cups of excellent *mezcal* which the general always carried with him on his expeditions, and which the trappers appreciated as it deserved.

Whilst *Dona Luz* and the others took a *siesta* till the heat of the sun's rays should be a little abated, the general, begging Black Elk to follow him, went out of the hut.

As soon as they were at a sufficient distance, the general seated himself at the foot of an ebony-tree, motioning for his companion to follow his example.

After a moment's silence—

"Allow me, in the first place," the general said, "to thank you for your frank hospitality. That duty performed, I wish to put a few questions."

"*Ca*ballero!" the trapper replied, "you know what the red-skins say: between every word smoke your *calumet*, in order to weigh your words well."

"You speak like a sensible man ; but be satisfied that I have no intention of putting questions to you that concern your profession, or any object that can affect you personally."

"If I can answer you, caballero, be assured I will not hesitate to satisfy you."

"Thank you, friend, I expected no less from you. How long have you been an inhabitant of the prairies?"

"Ten years, already, sir ; and God grant I may remain here as many more."

"This sort of life pleases you then?"

"More than I can tell you. A man must, as I have done, begin it almost as a boy, undergo all the trials, endure all the sufferings, partake all its hazards, in order to understand all the intoxicating charms it procures, the celestial joy it gives, and the unknown pleasures into which it plunges us! In the desert, in the prairie, face to face with God, his ideas enlarge, his spirit grows, and he becomes really what the Supreme Being meant to make him ; that is to say, the king of the creation."

The general sighed deeply as he spoke, a furtive tear trickled over his grey moustache.

"That's true," he said, sadly ; "this life has strange charms for the man who has tasted it, and they attach him by bonds nothing can break. Have you many Mexicans among your companions?"

"Many."

"I should like to obtain some information respecting them."

"There is only one man who could give you any, sir ; and he is not now here."

"And he is called?"

"Loyal Heart."

"Loyal Heart!" the general replied, warmly ; "surely I know that man."

"Yes, you do."

"Good heavens! what a fatality!"

"Perhaps it will be more easy than you suppose to meet with him again, if you really wish to see him."

"I have an immense interest in wishing it."

"Then make your mind easy ; you will soon see him."

"How so?"

"Oh! very simply. Loyal Heart lays his traps near me ; at the present time I am watching them ; but it cannot be long before he returns."

"God grant it may be so!" said the general.

"As soon as he comes I will send you word, if you have not quitted your camp."

"Do you know where my troop is encamped?"

"We know everything in the desert," the trapper said, with a smile.

At that moment Dona Luz came out of the hut. The travellers remounted their horses, and after thanking the trappers for their cordial hospitality, they again took the road to the camp.

CHAPTER XX.

TREACHERY.

THE return was dull ; the general was plunged in profound reflections, caused by his conversation with the trapper. Dona Luz was thinking of the warning that had been given her ; the guide embarrassed by the two conversations of Black Elk with the lady and the general, had a secret presentiment, which told him to keep on his

guard. The two lanceros alone rode on carelessly, thinking only of one thing—the repose which awaited them on regaining the camp.

The Babbler incessantly cast anxious looks around him, appearing to seek for auxiliaries amidst the thickets which the little party passed silently through.

Day was drawing to a close; it would not be long before the sun disappeared, and already the mysterious denizens of the forests at intervals sent forth dull roarings.

“Are we far from the camp?” the general asked.

“No,” the guide replied; “scarcely an hour’s ride.”

“Let us mend our speed then; I should not like to be surprised by the night in this woody country.”

The troop fell into a quick trot, which, in less than half an hour, brought them home.

Captain Aguilar and the doctor came to receive the travellers on their arrival, and they seated themselves at table.

But the sadness which for some time past seemed to have taken possession of the general and his niece increased instead of diminishing. It had its effect upon the repast; all swallowed their food hastily, without exchanging a word. As soon as they had finished, under pretext of the fatigues of the journey, they separated, ostensibly to seek repose, but, in reality, for the sake of being alone.

On his part, the guide was not at his ease, a bad conscience, a sage has said, is the most annoying night-companion a man can have. As Babbler possessed the worst of all bad consciences, he had no inclination to sleep. He walked about the camp, harassed by anxiety and perhaps remorse, seeking for some means of getting out of the scrape in which he found himself. But it was in vain for him to put his mind to the rack: nothing suggested itself to calm his apprehensions.

In the meantime night was advancing, the moon had disappeared, and a thick darkness hovered over all.

Every one was asleep, or appearing to sleep; the guide alone, who had taken upon himself the first watch, was seated on a bale, with his arms crossed upon his breast, and his eyes fixed upon vacancy.

All at once a hand was placed upon his shoulder, and a voice murmured in his ear the single word—

“Kennedy!”

The guide, with that presence of mind, and that imperturbable phlegm which never abandons the Indian or the half-breed, cast a timid glance around him, to assure himself that he was alone; then he seized the hand which had remained resting upon his shoulder, and dragged the man who had spoken to him, and who followed him without resistance, to a retired spot, where he thought he was certain of being overheard by nobody.

As the two men passed by the tent, the curtains opened, and a shadow glided silently after them.

When they were concealed amidst the packages, and standing near enough to each other to speak in a voice as low as a breath, the guide muttered—

“God be praised! I have been expecting your visit with impatience, Kennedy.”

“Did you know that I was about to come?” the latter remarked, suspiciously.

“No, but I hoped you would!”

“Speak, then, and make haste!”

“That is what I am going to do. All is lost!”

“Hem! what do you mean by that?”

“What do I mean is, that to-day the general, guided by me, went—

“Ah! yes, I know all that. I saw you.”

“Malediction! why did you not attack us, then?”

"There were but two of us."

"I should have made the third; the party would then have been equal; the general had but two lanceros."

"That's true: but I did not think of it."

"You were wrong. All would now be ended, instead of which all is now probably lost."

"How so?"

"Eh! *carai!* It is clear enough. The general and his niece held long conversations with that sneaking hound, Black Elk, and you know he has been acquainted with me a long while. There is no doubt he has made them suspicious of me."

"Why did you lead them to the beaver-pond, then?"

"How could I tell I should meet that cursed trapper there?"

"In our trade we must be awake to everything."

"You are right. I have committed an error. At present I believe the evil to be without remedy, for I have a presentiment that Black Elk has completely edified the general with respect to me."

"Hum! that is more than probable. What is to be done, then?"

"Act as soon as possible, without giving them time to put themselves on their guard."

"For my part, I ask no better than that, you know."

"Yes, but where is the captain? Has he returned?"

"He arrived this evening. All our men are concealed in the grotto; there are forty of us."

"Bravo! Why did you not come altogether, instead of you by yourself? Only see what a fine opportunity we have lost! They are all sleeping like dormice. We could have seized them all in less than ten minutes."

"You are right; but one cannot foresee everything; besides, the affair was not so agreed upon with the captain."

"That is true. Why did you come then?"

"To warn you that we are ready, and only wait your signal to act."

"Let us consider, then, what is best to be done? Advise me."

"How the devil can you expect me to advise you? Can I tell what is going on here so as to tell you what you must do?"

The guide reflected for a minute, then he raised his head, and surveyed the heavens attentively.

"Listen," he replied; "it is but two o'clock in the morning, and you are going back to the grotto?"

"Yes. What next?"

"You will tell the captain that, if he wishes it, I will deliver the girl up to him this night."

"Hum! that appears to me rather difficult."

"You are stupid."

"Very possibly, but I don't see how."

"Attend then. The guarding of the camp is thus distributed: In the daytime the soldiers guard the entrenchments; but as they are not accustomed to the life of the prairies, and as in the night their assistance would do more harm than good, the other guides and I are charged with the guard whilst the soldiers repose."

"That's cleverly managed," Kennedy said, laughing.

"Is it not?" the Babbler said. "You get on horseback then; when you arrive at the bottom of the hill, six of the bravest of you must come and join me. With their aid I undertake to bind, while they sleep, all the soldiers and the general himself."

"There is something in that; that's a good idea."

"Very well. When once our folks are safely bound, I will whistle, and the captain will come up with the rest of the troop. Then he may arrange his matters with the girl as well as he is able; that is his concern; my task will be accomplished."

"Capital."

"In this fashion we shall avoid bloodshed and blows, for which I have no great fancy."

"We know your prudence in that respect."

"Zounds! my dear fellow, when we have affairs like this on hand, which, when they succeed, present great advantages, we should always endeavour so to arrange matters as to have all the chances in our favour."

"Perfectly well reasoned; besides which, your idea pleases me much, and, without delay, I will put it into execution; but, in the first place, let us make things clear, to avoid misunderstandings, which are always disagreeable."

"Very well."

"If, as I believe he will, the captain finds your plan good, and very likely to succeed, as soon as we are at the foot of the hill, I will come up with six resolute fellows, whom I will pick out myself. On which side must we introduce ourselves into the camp?"

"The devil! why, on the side you have already entered: you ought to know it."

"And you, where will you be?"

"At the spot where you enter, ready to assist you."

"That's well. Now all is agreed and understood, and I am off."

"The sooner the better."

"You are always right. Guide me to the place I am to go out at; it is so cursedly dark, that I may lose my way, and tumble over some sleeping soldier, and that would not help our business at all."

"Give me your hand."

"Here it is."

The two men rose, and prepared to proceed to the place where the captain's emissary was to leave the camp; but, at the same moment, a shadow interposed itself between them, and a firm voice said—

"You are traitors, and shall die!"

In spite of their self-possession, the two men remained for an instant stupefied. Without giving them time to recover their presence of mind, the person who had spoken discharged two pistols, point blank at them.

The miserable wretches uttered a loud cry. One fell, but the other, bounding like a tiger-cat, scrambled over the intrenchments and disappeared before a second shot could be fired at him.

At the double report and the cry uttered by the bandits, the whole camp was roused, and all rushed to the barricades.

The general and Captain Aguilar were the first to arrive at the spot. They found Dona Luz, with two smoking pistols in her hands, whilst, at her feet, a man was writhing in the agonies of death.

"What does all this mean, niece? What has happened, in the name of Heaven? Are you wounded?" the terrified general asked.

"Be at ease, dear uncle, on my account," the young lady replied. "I have only punished a traitor. Two wretches were plotting in the dark against our common safety; one of them has escaped, but I believe the other is at least seriously wounded."

The general eagerly examined the dying man. By the light of the torch he held in his hand he at once recognised Kennedy, the guide whom the Babbler pretended had been burnt alive in the conflagration of the prairie.

"Oh, oh!" he said, "what does all this mean?"

"It means, uncle," the girl replied, "that if God had not come to my aid, w

should have been this very night surprised by a troop of bandits, lying in ambush close to us."

"Let us lose no time, then!"

And the general, assisted by Captain Aguilar, hastened to prepare everything for a vigorous resistance.

The Babblor had fled, but a large track of blood proved that he was seriously wounded. If it had been light enough, they would have attempted to pursue him, and, perhaps, might have taken him; but, in the midst of darkness, and suspecting that their enemies were in ambush in the neighbourhood, the general was not willing to risk his soldiers out of the camp.

As to Kennedy, he was dead.

The first moment of excitement past, Dona Luz, no longer sustained by the danger of her situation, began to feel she was a woman. Her energy disappeared, her eyes closed, a convulsive trembling shook her whole frame; she fainted, and would have fallen, if the doctor, who was watching her, had not caught her in his arms.

He carried her in that state into the tent, and lavished upon her all the remedies usual in such cases.

The young lady gradually recovered: her spirits were calmed, and order was re-established in her ideas.

The advice given her that very day by Black Elk then naturally recurred to her mind; she deemed the moment was coming for claiming the execution of his promise, and she made a sign to the doctor.

"My dear doctor," she said, in a sweet but weak voice, "are you willing to render me a great service?"

"Dispose of me as you please, *senorita*."

"Do you know a trapper named Black Elk?"

"Yes; he has a hut not a great way from us, near a beaver-pond."

"That is the person, my good doctor. Well, as soon as it is light, you must go to him from me."

"For what purpose, *senorita*?"

"Because I ask you," she said, in a calm tone.

"Oh! then you may be at ease; I will go," he replied.

"Thank you, doctor."

"What shall I say to him?"

"You will give him an account of what has taken place here to-night."

"The deuce!"

"And then you will add—retain my exact words, you must repeat them to him to the very letter."

"I listen with all my ears, and will engrave them on my memory."

"Black Elk, the hour is come! You understand that, do you not?"

"Perfectly, *senorita*."

"You swear to do what I ask of you?"

"I swear it," he said, in a solemn voice. "At sun-rise, I will go to the trapper; I will give him an account of the events of the night, and will add—'Black Elk, the hour is come.' That is all?"

"Yes, all, my kind doctor."

"Well, then, now get a little sleep, *senorita*; I swear to you that what you wish shall be done."

"Again, thank you!" the young girl murmured, with a sweet smile, and pressing his hand.

Then, quite broken down by the terrible emotions of the night, she sank back upon her bed, where she soon fell into a calm, refreshing sleep.

At day-break, in spite of the observations of the general, who in vain endeavoured to prevent his leaving the camp, by recounting to him all the dangers he was needlessly going to expose himself to, the worthy doctor, who had shaken his head at all that his friend said to him, persisted, without giving any reason, in going out, and set off down the hill at a sharp trot.

When once in the forest, he put spurs to his horse, and galloped towards the hut of Black Elk.

CHAPTER XXI.

EAGLE HEAD.

EAGLE HEAD was a chief as prudent as he was determined; he knew he had everything to fear from the Americans, unless he completely concealed his trail.

Hence, after the surprise he had effected against the new establishment of the whites, upon the banks of the great Canadian river, he neglected nothing to secure his troop from the terrible reprisals which threatened them.

It is scarcely possible to form an idea of the talent displayed by the Indians when the object is to conceal their trail.

Twenty times do they repass the same place, entangling, as it were, the traces of their passage in each other, in such a manner that they end by becoming inextricable; neglecting no accident of the ground, marching in each other's footsteps to conceal their number, following for whole days the courses of rivulets, frequently with the water up to their waist, carrying their precautions and patience so far as even to efface with their hands, and so to speak, step by step, the vestiges which might denounce them to the keen, interested eyes of their enemies.

The tribe of the Serpent, to which the warriors commanded by Eagle Head belonged, had entered the prairies nearly five hundred warriors strong, in order to hunt the buffalo, and give battle to the Pawnees and Sioux, with whom they were continually at war.

It was Eagle Head's object, as soon as his campaign should be over, to join his brothers immediately, in order to place in safety the booty gained by the capture of the village, and to take part in a grand expedition which his tribe was preparing against the white trappers and half-breeds spread over the prairies, whom the Indians, with reason, considered as implacable enemies.

Notwithstanding the extreme precaution displayed by the chief, the detachment had marched rapidly.

On the evening of the sixth day that had passed away since the destruction of the fort, the Comanches halted on the banks of a little river, and prepared to encamp for the night.

Nothing is more simple than the encamping of Indians upon the war-path.

The horses are hobbled, that they may not stray away; if the savages do not fear a surprise, they kindle a fire; if the contrary, every one manages to get a little food and rest as well as he can.

Since their departure from the fort, no indication had given the Comanches reason to think that they were pursued or watched, and their scouts had discovered no suspicious track. They were at but a short distance from the camp of their tribe.

Eagle Head ordered a fire to be lit, and himself posted sentinels to watch over the safety of all.

When he had taken these prudent measures, the chief placed his back against an

ebony tree, took his calumet, and ordered the old man and the Spanish woman to be brought before him.

When they appeared, Eagle Head saluted the old man cordially, and offered him his calumet, a mark of kindness which the old man accepted, carefully preparing himself for the questions which the Indian was, doubtless, about to put to him.

As he expected, after a silence of a few moments, the latter spoke.

"Does my brother find himself comfortable with the red-skins?" asked he.

"I should be wrong to complain, chief," the Spaniard replied; "since I have been with you I have been treated very kindly."

"My brother is a friend," the Comanche said.

The old man bowed.

"We are at length in our own hunting-grounds," the chief continued; "my brother, the White Head, is fatigued with a long life: he is better at the counsel fire than on horseback, hunting the elk or the buffalo—what does my brother wish?"

"Chief," the Spaniard replied, "your words are true; there was a time when, like every other child of the prairies, I passed whole days in hunting upon a fiery unbroken mustang; my strength has disappeared, my limbs have lost their elasticity and my eye its infallibility; I am worth nothing now in an expedition."

"Good!" the Indian replied, imperturbably, blowing clouds of smoke from his mouth and nostrils; "let my brother tell his friend what he wishes."

"I thank you, chief, and I will profit by your kindness; I should be happy if you would consent to furnish me with means of gaining, without being disturbed, some establishment of men of my own colour, where I might pass in peace the few days I have yet to live."

"Eh! why should I not do it? Nothing is more easy; as soon as we have rejoined the tribe, since my brother is not willing to dwell with us, his desires shall be satisfied."

There was a moment of silence. The old man, believing the conversation terminated, prepared to retire; with a gesture, the chief ordered him to remain.

After a few instants, the Indian shook the ashes out of his pipe, passed the shank of it through his belt, and fixing upon the Spaniard a glance marked by a strange expression, he said, in a sad voice—

"My brother is happy, although he has seen many winters, he does not walk alone in the path of life."

"What does the chief mean?" the old man asked; "I do not understand."

"My brother has a family," the Comanche replied.

"Alas! my brother is deceived; I am alone in this world."

"What does my brother say? Has he not his mate?"

A sad smile passed over the pale lips of the old man.

"No," he said, after a moment's pause; "I have no mate."

"What is that woman to him, then?" said the chief, pointing to the Spanish woman, who stood pensive and silent by the side of the old man.

"That woman is my mistress."

"Wah! Can it be that my brother is a slave?" said the Comanche, with an ill-omened smile.

"No," the old man replied haughtily; "I am not the slave of that woman, I am her devoted servant."

"Wah!" said the chief, shaking his head.

But the words of the Spaniard were unintelligible to the Indian; the distinction was too subtle for him to seize it. At the end of two or three minutes he shook his head, and gave up the endeavour to solve the, to him, incomprehensible problem.

"Good!" he said, "the woman shall go with my brother."

"That is what I always intended," the Spaniard replied.

The aged woman, who to this moment had preserved a prudent silence, judged it was now time to take part in the conversation.

"I am thankful to the chief," she said; "but since he is good enough to take interest in our welfare, will he permit me to ask him a favour?"

"Let my mother speak; my ears are open."

"I have a son who is a great white hunter; he must at this moment be in the prairie; perhaps, if my brother would consent to keep us a few days longer with him, it would be possible to meet with him."

At these imprudent words the Spaniard made a gesture of terror.

"Senorita!" he said sharply in his native language, "take care lest——"

"Silence!" the Indian interrupted in an angry tone; "why does my white brother speak before me in an unknown tongue? Does he fear I should understand his words?"

"Oh, chief!" said the Spaniard, in a tone of denial.

"Let my brother, then, allow my pale-faced mother to speak; she is speaking to a chief."

The old man was silent, but a sad presentiment weighed upon his heart.

The Comanche chief knew perfectly well to whom he was speaking; he was playing with the two Spaniards, as a cat does with a mouse; but, allowing none of his impressions to appear, he turned towards the woman, and bowing with that instinctive courtesy which distinguishes the Indians, said in a mild voice, and with a sympathetic smile—

"Oh! oh! the son of my mother is a great hunter, is he? So much the better."

The heart of the poor woman dilated with joy.

"Yes," she said, with emotion, "he is one of the bravest trappers on the Western prairies."

"*Hah!*" said the chief, in a still more amiable manner, "this renowned warrior must have a name?"

The Spaniard suffered a martyrdom; held in awe by the eye of the Comanche, he did not know how to warn his mistress not to pronounce the name of her son.

"His name is well known," said the woman.

"Oh!" the old man cried eagerly, "all women are thus; with them all their sons are heroes; this one, although an excellent young man, is no better than others; certes, his name has never reached my brother."

"How does my brother know that?" said the Indian, with a sardonic smile.

"I suppose so," the old man replied; "or, at least, if by chance my brother has heard it pronounced, it must long ago have escaped his memory, and does not merit being recalled to it. If my brother will permit us, we will retire; the hour of repose is come."

"In an instant," said the Comanche quietly; and turning to the woman, "What is the name of the warrior of the pale-faces?" he asked.

But the old lady, placed upon her guard by the intervention of her servant, with whose prudence and devotion she was well acquainted, made no answer, conscious that she had committed a fault, and not knowing how to remedy it.

"Does not my mother hear me?" said the chief.

"Of what use would it be to repeat to you a name which, according to all probability, is unknown to you, and which cannot interest you? If my brother will permit me, I will retire."

"No; not before my mother has told me the name of her son, the great warrior," said the Comanche.

The old Spaniard saw an end must be put to this; his determination was formed in a second.

"My brother is a great chief," he said; "although his hair is still brown, his wisdom

is immense. I am his friend, and am sure he would not abuse the chance that has delivered into his hands the mother of his enemy: the name of that woman's son is Loyal Heart."

"Wah!" said Eagle Head, with a sinister smile, "I knew that well enough: why have the pale-faces two hearts and two tongues? and why do they always seek to deceive the red-skins?"

"We have not sought to deceive you, chief."

"I say you have. Since you have been with us, you have been treated as children of the tribe. I have saved your life!"

"That is true."

"Very well," he resumed, with an ironical smile, "I will prove to you that Indians do not forget, and that they know how to render good for evil. These wounds that you see me bear, who inflicted them? Loyal Heart! We are enemies; his mother is in my power; I could at once tie her to the stake of torture; it is my right to do so."

The two Spaniards hung their heads.

"The law of the prairies is an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Listen to me well. In remembrance of our friendship, I grant you a respite. To-morrow at sunrise, you shall go in search of Loyal Heart; if, within four days, he does not deliver himself up into my hands, his mother shall perish; my young men shall burn her alive at the stake of blood, and my brothers shall make war-whistles of her bones."

The old man eagerly implored mercy. He threw himself on his knees before the chief; but the Indian spurned him with his foot, and turned away.

"Oh! madam," the old man murmured, in despair, "you are lost!"

"But be sure, Eusebio," the mother replied, choking with tears, "be sure not to bring back my son! Of what consequence is my death! Alas! has not my life already been long enough?"

The old servant cast a glance of admiration at his mistress.

"Ever the same!" he said affectionately.

"Does not the life of a mother belong to her child?" she said.

The old people sank, overwhelmed with grief, at the foot of a tree, and passed the night in praying to God.

CHAPTER XXII.

NÔ EUSEBIO.

THE precautions taken by Eagle Head to conceal his march were good as regarded most whites, whose senses, less kept upon the watch than those of partisans and hunters, and little acquainted with Indian stratagems, are almost incapable of directing their course in these vast solitudes; but for men like Loyal Heart and Belhumeur they were insufficient.

The two bold partisans never lost the track.

Accustomed to the zig-zags and devices of the Indian warriors, they did not allow themselves to be deceived by the sudden turns, the counter-marches, the false halts, in a word, by any of the obstacles which the Comanches had planted so freely on their route. And then there was one thing of which the Indians had not dreamed, and which revealed as clearly the direction of their march as if they had taken the pains to mark it with stakes.

We have said that the hunters had found, close to the ruins of a cabin, a blood-

hound fastened to a tree, and that this blood-hound, when set free, after bestowing a few caresses on Belhumeur, had set off, his nose to the wind, to rejoin his master, who was no other than the old Spaniard—in fact, he did rejoin him.

The traces of the blood-hound, which the Indians never dreamed of effacing, for the very simple reason that they did not observe that he was with them, were to be seen all along, and for hunters so skilful as Loyal Heart and Belhumeur, this was an Ariadne's thread which nothing could break.

The hunters therefore rode tranquilly on with their guns across the saddle and accompanied by their *rastreros*, in the track of the Comanches, who were far from suspecting that they had such a rear-guard.

Every evening Loyal Heart stopped at the precise place where Eagle Head had, on the previous day, established his camp, for such was the diligence of the two men that the Indians only preceded them by a few leagues; the trappers could easily have passed them, if it had been their wish to do so; but, for certain reasons, Loyal Heart confined himself to following them for some time longer.

After having passed the night in a quiet glade, on the banks of a clear rivulet, whose soft murmur had lulled them to sleep, the hunters were preparing to resume their journey, their horses were saddled, they were eating a slice of elk, standing, like people in a hurry to depart, when Loyal Heart turned towards his companion, and said—

"Let us sit down a minute, there is no occasion to hurry, since Eagle Head has rejoined his tribe."

"Be it so," replied Belhumeur, laying himself down upon the grass. "We can talk a bit."

"I cannot think how it was I did not imagine these cursed Comanches had a war detachment in the neighbourhood! It is impossible for us two to think of taking a camp in which there are five hundred warriors."

"That's true," said Belhumeur, philosophically; "they are a great many, and yet, you know, my dear friend, that if your heart bids you, we can but try."

"Thanks!" said Loyal Heart, smiling; "but I think it useless."

"As you like."

"Stratagem alone can assist us."

"Let us try stratagem, then; I am at your orders."

"We have some traps near here, I believe?"

"Pardieu!" said the Canadian, "within half a mile there is a large pond of beavers."

"That's true; for the last few days, Belhumeur, I scarcely know what I am doing; this captivity of my mother makes me mad; I must deliver her."

"That is my opinion, Loyal Heart, and I will aid you in it with all my soul."

"To-morrow morning, at day-break, you will repair to Black Elk, and beg him, in my name, to collect as many white hunters and trappers as he can."

"Very well."

"In the meantime I will go to the camp of the Comanches, to treat for the ransom of my mother; if they will not restore her to me, we will have recourse to arms, and we will see if a score of the best rifles of the frontiers will not give a good account of five hundred of these plunderers of the prairies."

"And if they should make you prisoner?"

"In that case I will send you my blood-hound, who will come to you in the river grotto; on seeing it come alone, you will know what that means."

The Canadian shook his head.

"No," said he, "I shall not do so."

"What! you will not do so?" the hunter exclaimed.

"Certainly no; I will not do so, Loyal Heart. Compared with you, who are so

brave and so intelligent, I am but little worth, I know; but if I have only one good quality, nothing can deprive me of it, and that quality is my devotedness to you."

"I know it, my friend; you love me like a brother."

"And you would have me leave you, as they say in my country beyond the great lakes, to go cheerfully into the jaws of the wolf; and yet my comparison is humiliating for the wolf, for the Indians are a thousand times more ferocious! No, I repeat, I will not do that; it would be a wicked action, and if any harm happened to you, I should never forgive myself."

"Explain yourself, Belhumeur," said Loyal Heart; "upon my honour I cannot understand you."

"Oh! that is easy enough," the Canadian answered; "if I am not clever, and am not an able speaker, I have good common sense, and can see my way clearly when those I love are concerned; and I love nobody better than you, now my poor father is dead."

"Speak, then, my friend," said Loyal Heart, "and pardon the little ill-humour I could not repress."

Belhumeur reflected for a few seconds, and then continued—

"You know," he said, "that the greatest enemies we have in the prairies are the Comanches; by an inexplicable fatality, whenever we have had a struggle to maintain, it has been against them, and never have they been able to boast of the smallest advantage over us; hence has arisen between them and us an implacable hatred, a hatred which has latterly been increased by our quarrel with Eagle Head, whose arm you had the good chance, or rather the ill chance, of breaking, when it would have been so easy for you to have broken his head."

"To the purpose!" Loyal Heart interrupted.

"The purpose! Well, this is it," Belhumeur replied, displaying no surprise at his friend's interruption: "Eagle Head is anxious, by any means, to obtain your scalp, and it is evident that if you commit the imprudence of placing yourself in his hands, he will not let the opportunity slip."

"But," Loyal Heart replied, "my mother is in his power."

"Yes," said Belhumeur; "but he does not know who she is. You are aware, my friend, that the Indians only treat captured women ill in exceptional cases; generally they behave to them with respect."

"That is true," said the hunter.

"Therefore, as no one will go and tell Eagle Head that his prisoner is your mother, unless she does so herself, through the uneasiness she may feel on your account, she is as safe among the red-skins as if she were on the great square of Quebec. It is useless, then, to commit an imprudence. Let us get together a score of good fellows; I don't ask for more; and let us watch the Indians. On the first opportunity that offers we will fall upon them vigorously, we will kill as many as we can, and deliver your mother. Now that, I think, is the wisest course we can take."

"I think, my friend," Loyal Heart replied, pressing his hand, "that you are the best creature in existence; that your advice is good, and I will follow it."

"We will now get on horseback," continued Loyal Heart; "we will carefully avoid the Indian camp, using all possible caution not to be tracked; and will then go to the hatto of our brave companion Black Elk, who is a man of good counsel, and who will be useful to us in what we purpose doing."

"Be it so, then," said Belhumeur, cheerfully.

The hunters quitted the glade they had slept in, and making a *détour* to avoid the Indian camp, the smoke of which they perceived within a league of them, they directed their course towards the spot where, in all probability, Black Elk was philosophically employed in laying snares for beavers, the interesting animals that Dona Luz had admired so much.

They had been thus riding on for nearly an hour, when his hounds on a sudden showed signs of excitement, and rushed forward, yelping with symptoms of joy.

"What's the matter with our rastros?" said Loyal Heart; "one would think they smelt a friend."

"Pardieu! they have scented Black Elk, and we shall probably see them come back together."

"That is not unlikely," the hunter said pensively.

At the expiration of a few minutes they perceived a horseman riding towards them at full speed, surrounded by the dogs, who ran barking by his side.

"It is not Black Elk," Belhumeur cried.

"No," said Loyal Heart, "it is Nô Eusebio; what can this mean? He is alone; can anything have happened to my mother?"

"Let us mend our pace," said Belhumeur, clapping spurs to his horse.

The hunter followed him, a prey to mortal alarm.

"Woe! woe!" the old man cried, in great agitation, as he approached.

"What is the matter, Nô Eusebio? speak, in the name of Heaven."

"Your mother, Don Rafael! your mother!"

"Well, speak!—oh, speak!" the young man cried.

"Oh, my God!" said the old man, wringing his hands, "it is too late!"

"Speak, then, in the name of Heaven!—you are killing me."

The old man cast on him a look of utter desolation.

"Don Rafael," he said, "have courage!—be a man!"

"My God! my God! what fearful news are you going to communicate to me, my friend?"

"Your mother is a prisoner to Eagle Head."

"I know she is."

"If this very day, this morning even, you do not deliver yourself up to the chief of the Comanches—"

"Well, well!"

"She will be burnt alive."

"Ah!" the young man exclaimed, with a cry amounting to a shriek.

His friend supported him, otherwise he would have fallen from his saddle.

"But," Belhumeur asked, "is it to-day—do you say, old man, that she is to be burnt?"

"Yes, at sunrise; and see," he said, with an agonized gesture, pointing to the heavens.

"Oh!" Loyal Heart cried, with a vehemence impossible to be described, "I will save my mother!"

And, bending over the neck of his horse, he set off with frantic rapidity.

The others followed.

He turned round towards Belhumeur.

"Where are you going?" he asked, in a short, sharp tone.

"To help you save your mother, or to die with you."

"Come on, then!" Loyal Heart replied, plunging his spurs into the bleeding sides his horse.

There was something fearful and terrible in the desperate course of these three men who, formed in line, with pale brows, compressed lips, and fiery looks, cleared torrents and ravines, surmounted all obstacles, incessantly urging their horses, which seemed to devour space, while panting painfully, bounding madly, and dripping with perspiration and blood.

"My God! my God! save—save my mother!" the hunter kept repeating in a hollow voice, as he rode furiously onward.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE COUNCIL OF THE GREAT CHIEFS.

NOTWITHSTANDING the stormy conversation he had had with Eusebio, Eagle Head had continued to treat the prisoners with the greatest kindness.

There is one fact worthy of being noticed, and upon which we cannot too strongly dwell, and that is the manner in which Indians generally treat their prisoners. Far from inflicting useless tortures upon them, or tormenting them without cause, as has been too often repeated, they take the greatest care of them, and appear, in some sort, to compassionate their misfortune.

The separation of the two prisoners was most painful and agonizing; the old servant set off, despair in his soul, in search of the hunter, whilst the poor mother, with a broken heart, followed the Comanche warriors.

On the second day, Eagle Head arrived at the *rendezvous* appointed by the great chiefs of the nation.

The camp presented the most animated picture possible; the squaws passed here and there, loaded with wood and meat, or guided the sledges drawn by dogs, which conveyed their wealth; the warriors, gravely squatted around fires lighted in the open air, on account of the mildness of the temperature, were smoking and chatting together.

And yet it was easy to guess that something extraordinary was about to happen; for notwithstanding the early hour—the sun scarcely appearing above the horizon—the principal chiefs were assembled in the council-lodge, where, judging from the grave and reflective expression of their countenances, they were about to discuss some serious question.

This day was the last of those granted by Eagle Head to Eusebio.

The Indian warrior, faithful to his hatred, and in haste to satisfy his vengeance, had convoked the great chiefs in order to obtain their authority for the execution of his abominable project.

We repeat here, Indians are not cruel for the pleasure of being so. Necessity is their first law; and never do they order the punishment of a prisoner, particularly a woman, unless the interest of the nation requires it.

As soon as the chiefs were assembled round the fire of council, the pipe-bearer entered the circle, holding in his hand the calumet ready lighted; he bowed towards the four cardinal points, murmuring a short prayer, and then presented the calumet to the oldest chief, but retaining the bowl of the pipe in his hand.

When all the chiefs had smoked, one after the other, the pipe-bearer emptied the ashes of the pipe into the fire, saying—

“Chiefs of the great Comanche nation, may *Natosh* (God) give you wisdom, so that whatever be your determination, it may be conformable to justice.”

Then, after bowing respectfully, he retired.

A moment of silence followed, in which every one seemed meditating seriously.

At length the most aged of the chiefs arose.

He was a venerable old man, whose body was furrowed with the scars of innumerable wounds, and who enjoyed among his people a great reputation for wisdom. He was named Eshis (the Sun).

“My son, Eagle Head, has,” he said, “an important communication to make to the council of the chiefs; let him speak, our ears are open. Eagle Head is a warrior as wise as he is valiant; his words will be listened to by us with respect.”

"Thanks!" the warrior replied; "my father is wisdom itself. Natosh conceals nothing from him."

The chiefs bowed, and Eagle Head continued.

"The pale-faces, our eternal persecutors, pursue and harass us without intermission, forcing us to abandon to them, one by one, our best hunting-grounds, and to seek refuge in the depths of the forest like timid deer; many of them even dare to come into the prairies which serve us as places of refuge, to trap beavers and hunt elks and buffaloes which are our property. These faithless men, the outcasts of their people, rob us and assassinate us when they can do it with impunity. Is it just that we should suffer their rapine without complaining? Shall we allow ourselves to be slaughtered like timid ashahas without seeking to avenge ourselves? Does not the law of the prairies say, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'? Let my father reply; let my brothers say if that is just."

"Vengeance is allowable," said the Sun; "it is the undoubted right of the weak and the oppressed; and yet it ought to be proportioned to the injury received."

Eagle Head, perceiving that his cause was gained in the minds of his auditors, continued—

"I might have been able, if it had only concerned myself," he said, "to pardon these injuries, however serious they may be; but we have now to deal with a public enemy, with a man who has sworn the destruction of our nation. His mother is in my hands. I have hesitated to sacrifice her; I have not allowed myself to be carried away by my hatred. I have wished to be just; and though it would have been so easy for me to kill this woman, I have preferred waiting till you, revered chiefs of our nation, should yourselves give me the order to do so. I have done still more: so repugnant was it to me to shed blood uselessly, and punish the innocent for the guilty, that I have granted this woman a respite of four days, in order to give her son the power of saving her, by presenting himself to suffer in her place. A pale-face made prisoner by me is gone in search of him; but that man is a rabbit's heart—he has only the courage to assassinate unarmed enemies. He is not come! he will not come! This morning, at sunrise, expires the delay granted by me. Where is this man? He has not appeared! What say my brothers? Is my conduct just? ought I to be blamed? Or shall this woman be tied to the stake, so that the pale-faced robbers, terrified by her death, may acknowledge that the Comanches are formidable warriors, who never leave an insult unpunished? Have I spoken well, men of power?"

After having pronounced this long speech, Eagle Head resumed his seat, and crossing his arms on his breast, he awaited the decision of the chiefs.

A tolerably long silence followed this speech. At length the Sun arose.

"My brother has spoken well," he said. "All he has said is just; the whites, our ferocious enemies, are eager for our destruction; however painful for us may be the punishment of this woman, it is necessary."

"It is necessary!" the chiefs repeated.

"Go!" the Sun resumed, "make the preparations; give to this execution the appearance of an expiation, and not that of a vengeance; everybody must be convinced that the Comanches do not torture women, but that they know how to punish the guilty."

The chiefs arose, and after respectfully bowing to the venerable head of the council, they retired.

Eagle Head had succeeded; he was about to avenge himself, without assuming the responsibility of an action of which he comprehended all the hideousness, but in which he had had the art to implicate all the chiefs of his nation under an appearance of justice, for which, inwardly, he cared but very little.

The preparations for the punishment were hurried on as fast as possible.

The women cut thin splinters of ash to be introduced under the nails, others prepared elder pith to make sulphur matches, whilst the youngest went into the forest to seek for armfuls of green wood, destined to burn the condemned woman slowly.

In the meantime, the men had completely stripped the bark off a tree which they had chosen as the stake of torture; they had then rubbed it well with elk fat mixed with red ochre; round its base they had placed the wood of the pyre, and this done, the sorcerer had come to conjure the tree by means of mysterious words, in order to render it fit for the purpose.

These preparations terminated, the condemned was brought to the foot of the stake, and seated, without being tied, upon the pile of wood intended to burn her; and the scalp dance commenced.

The unfortunate woman was, in appearance, impassible. She had made the sacrifice of her life; nothing that passed around her could any longer affect her.

Her eyes, burning with fever and swollen with tears, wandered without purpose over the vast crowd that surrounded her with the roarings of wild beasts. Her mind was, nevertheless, as keen and as lucid as in her happiest days. The poor mother had a fear which wrung her heart and made her endure a torture, compared with which those which the Indians were preparing to inflict upon her were as nothing; she trembled lest her son, warned of the horrid fate that awaited her, should hasten to save her, and give himself up to his ferocious enemies.

With her ear attentive to the least noise, she seemed to hear every instant the precipitate steps of her son flying to her assistance. Her heart bounded with fear. She prayed God from the depths of her soul to permit her to die instead of her child.

The scalp dance whirled ferociously around her.

A crowd of warriors, tall, handsome, magnificently dressed, but with their faces blackened, danced, two by two, round the stake, led by seven musicians armed with drums and chichikoues, who were striped with black and red, and wore upon their heads feathers of the screech owl, falling down behind.

The warriors had in their hands guns and clubs, ornamented with black feathers and red cloth, which they brought to the ground as they danced.

These men formed a vast semicircle around the stake; in face of them, and completing the circle, the women danced.

Eagle Head, who led the warriors, carried a long staff, at the end of which was suspended a human scalp, surmounted by a stuffed jay with its wings outspread; a little lower on the same stick were a second scalp, the skin of a lynx, and some feathers.

When they had danced thus for an instant, the musicians placed themselves by the side of the condemned, and made a deafening noise, singing, whilst beating the drums and shaking the chichikoues.

This dance continued a considerable time, accompanied by atrocious howlings, enough to madden with terror the unfortunate woman to whom they presaged the frightful tortures that awaited her.

At length Eagle Head touched the condemned lightly with his stick. At this signal the tumult ceased as if by enchantment, the ranks were broken, and every one seized his weapons.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TORTURE.

As soon as the scalp dance was over, the principal warriors of the tribe ranged themselves before the stake, their arms in hand, whilst the women, particularly the most

aged, fell upon the condemned, abusing her, pushing her, pulling her hair, and striking her, without her opposing the least resistance, or seeking to escape the ill-treatment with which they loaded her.

The unfortunate woman watched with feverish impatience the whirlings of the scalp dance, so greatly did she fear to see her beloved son appear and place himself between her and her executioners.

Like the ancient martyrs, she in her heart accused the Indians of losing precious time in useless ceremonies.

The truth was that, in spite of themselves, and although this execution appeared just, the Comanches had a repugnance to torture a helpless woman, already aged, and who had never injured them.

Eagle Head himself, notwithstanding his hatred, felt something like remorse for the crime he was committing. Far from hastening on the last preparations, he acted with an indecision and a disgust that he could not succeed in surmounting.

For intrepid men, it is always a degrading action to torture a weak creature, or a woman who has no other defence than her tears. If it had been a man, the agreement would have been general throughout the tribe to tie him to the stake.

Indian prisoners laugh at punishment; they insult their executioners, and, in their death-songs, they reproach their conquerors with their cowardice, their inexperience in making their victims suffer; they enumerate their own brave deeds, they count the enemies they scalped before they themselves yielded; in short, by their sarcasms and their contemptuous attitudes, they excite the anger of their executioners, reanimate their hatred, and, to a certain point, excuse their ferocity.

But a woman, weak and resigned, presenting herself like a lamb to the shambles, already half dead, what interest could such an execution offer?

The Comanches comprehended all this, thence their repugnance and hesitation. Nevertheless, the business must be gone through.

Eagle Head approached the prisoner, and delivering her from the harpies who annoyed her, said, in a solemn voice—

“Woman, I have kept my promise; your son has not come; you are about to die.”

“Thanks,” she said, in a tremulous voice.

“Are you not afraid of death?” he asked.

“No,” she replied, “it will be most welcome; my life has been nothing but one long agony; death will be to me a blessing.”

“But your son?”

“My son will be saved if I die; you have sworn it upon the bones of your fathers.”

“I have sworn it.”

“Deliver me up to death, then.”

“Are the women of your nation, then, like Indian squaws, who view torture without trembling?”

“Yes,” she replied; “all mothers despise it when the safety of their children is at stake.”

“Listen,” said the Indian, moved with involuntary pity; “I also have a mother whom I love; if you desire it, I will retard your punishment till sunset.”

“What should you do that for?” she replied with terrible simplicity. “No, warrior; if my grief really touches you, there is one favour, one favour alone which you can grant me.”

“Name it,” he said earnestly.

“Put me to death immediately.”

“But if your son arrives.”

“Of what importance is that to you? You require a victim, do you not? Very well, that victim is before you, you may torture her at your pleasure. Why do you hesitate? Put me to death, I say.”

"Your desire shall be satisfied," the Comanche replied. "Woman, prepare yourself."

She bowed her head upon her breast, and waited.

Upon a signal from Eagle Head, two warriors seized the prisoner, and tied her to the stake round the waist.

Then the exercise of the knife began; this is what it consists of—

Every warrior seizes his scalping-knife by the point with the thumb and first finger of his right hand, and launches it at the victim, so as to inflict only slight wounds.

Indians, in their punishments, endeavour to make the tortures continue as long as possible, and only give their enemy the *coup de grace* when they have torn life from him, so to say, piecemeal.

The warriors launched their knives with such marvellous skill, that all of them just grazed the unfortunate woman, inflicting nothing more than scratches.

The blood, however, flowed, she closed her eyes, and, absorbed in herself, prayed for the mortal stroke.

The warriors, to whom her body served as a target, grew warmer by degrees; curiosity, the desire of showing their skill, had taken in their minds the place of the pity they had at first felt. They applauded with loud shouts and laughter the prowess of the most adroit.

In a word, as it always happens, among civilised people as among savages, blood intoxicated them; their self-love was brought into play; every one sought to surpass the man who had preceded him; all other considerations were forgotten.

When all had thrown their knives, a number of the most skilful marksmen of the tribe took their guns.

This time it was necessary to have a sure eye, for an ill-directed ball might terminate the punishment, and deprive the spectators of the spectacle.

At every discharge the poor creature shrank within herself, though giving no signs of life beyond a nervous shudder which agitated her whole body.

"Let us have an end of this," said Eagle Head. "Comanche warriors are not jaguars; this woman has suffered enough; let her die at once."

A few murmurs were heard among the squaws and children, who were the most eager for the punishment of the prisoner.

But the warriors were of the opinion of their chief; this execution, shorn of the insults that victims generally address to their conquerors, possessed no attraction for them; and, besides, they were ashamed of such inveteracy against a woman.

Hence they spared the unfortunate woman the splinters of wood inserted under the nails, the sulphur matches fastened between the fingers, the mask of honey applied to the face that the bees might come and sting them, together with other tortures too long and hideous to enumerate.

But before proceeding to the last act of this atrocious tragedy, they untied the poor woman; for a few minutes they allowed her to take breath and recover from the terrible emotions she had undergone.

She sank on the ground almost insensible.

Eagle Head approached her.

"My mother is brave," he said; "many warriors would not have borne the trials with so much courage."

"I have a son," she replied with a look of ineffable sweetness; "it is for him I suffer."

"A warrior is happy in having such a mother."

"Why do you defer my death? It is cruel to act thus! warriors ought not to torment women."

"My mother is right, her tortures are ended."

"Am I going to die at last?" she asked with a sigh.

"Yes; they are preparing the pile."

In spite of herself the poor woman felt a shudder thrill her whole frame at this fearful intimation.

"Burn me!" she cried with terror; "why burn me?"

"It is the usual custom."

She let her head sink into her hands; but soon recovering, she raised an inspired glance towards Heaven—

"My God!" she murmured with resignation, "Thy will be done!"

"Does my mother feel herself sufficiently recovered to be fastened to the stake?" the chief asked in something like a tone of compassion.

"Yes!" she said, rising resolutely.

Eagle Head could not repress a gesture of admiration. Indians consider courage as the first of virtues.

"Come, then," he said.

The prisoner followed him with a firm step—all her strength was restored, she was at length going to die!

The chief led her to the stake of blood, to which she was bound a second time; before her they piled up the faggots of green wood, and at a signal from Eagle Head they were set on fire.

The fire did not take at first, on account of the moisture of the wood, which discharged clouds of smoke; but, after a few moments, the flame sparkled, extended by degrees, and then acquired great intensity.

The unfortunate woman could not suppress a cry of terror.

At that moment a horseman dashed at full speed into the midst of the camp; at a bound he was on the ground, and before any one could have opposed him, he tore away the burning wood from the pile, and cut the bonds of the victim.

"Oh! why have you come?" the poor mother murmured, sinking into his arms.

"My mother! pardon me!" Loyal Heart cried; "my God! how you must have suffered!"

"Begone, begone, Rafaël!" she repeated, smothering him with kisses; "leave me to die in your place; ought not a mother to give her life for her child?"

"Oh, do not speak so, my mother! you will drive me mad," said the young man.

By this time the emotion caused by the sudden appearance of Loyal Heart had subsided, the Indian warriors had recovered that stoicism which they affect under all circumstances.

Eagle Head advanced towards the hunter.

"My brother is welcome," he said; "I had given over expecting him."

"I am here; it was impossible to arrive sooner; my mother is free, I suppose?"

"She is free."

"She may go where she pleases?"

"Where she pleases,"

"No," said the prisoner, placing herself resolutely in front of the Indian chief; "it is too late: it is I who am to suffer; my son has no right to take my place."

"Dear mother, what are you saying?"

"That which is just," she replied with animation; "the time at which you were to have come is past, you have no right to be here to prevent my death. Begone, begone, Rafaël, I implore you!—Leave me to die."

"My mother," the young man replied, returning her caresses, "your love for me misleads you; I cannot allow such a crime to be accomplished."

"My God! my God!" the poor mother exclaimed, sobbing, "he will not understand anything! I should be so happy to die for him."

Overcome by emotions too powerful for nature, the poor mother sank fainting into the arms of her son.

Loyal Heart impressed a long and tender kiss upon her brow, and placing her in the hands of Nô Eusebio, who had arrived some minutes before, said in a voice choked with grief:

"Begone, poor mother; may she be happy, if happiness can exist for her without her child."

The old servant sighed, pressed the hand of Loyal Heart warmly, and placing the lifeless form of his mistress before him in the saddle, he turned his horse's head and left the camp slowly, no one attempting to oppose his departure.

Loyal Heart looked after his mother as long as he could see her; then, when she disappeared, and the steps of the horse that bore her could no longer be heard, he breathed a deep, broken sigh, and passing his hand over his brow, murmured—

"All is ended! My God, watch over her!"

Then, turning towards the Indian chief who surveyed him in silence, mingled with respect and admiration—he said in a firm clear voice, and with a contemptuous look—

"Comanche warriors! you are all cowards! brave men do not torture women!"

Eagle Head smiled.

"We shall see," he said ironically, "if the pale trapper is as brave as he pretends to be."

"At least I shall know how to die like a man," he replied haughtily.

"The mother of the hunter is free."

"Yes. Well! what do you want with me?"

"A prisoner has no arms."

"That's true," he said, with a smile of contempt; "I will give you mine."

"Not yet, if you please, good friend!" said a clear, sarcastic voice; and Belhumeur rode up, bearing across the front of his saddle a child of four or five years of age, and a rather pretty young Indian Squaw securely fastened to the tail of his horse.

"My son! my wife!" cried Eagle Head, in great terror.

"Yes," said the Canadian jeeringly, "your wife and child, whom I have made prisoners."

At a signal from his friend, Loyal Heart bounded on the woman, whose teeth chattered with fear, and who cast terrified looks on all sides.

"Now," Belhumeur continued with a sinister smile, "let us talk a bit; I think I have equalized the chances a little—what say you?"

And he placed the muzzle of a pistol to the brow of the little creature, which uttered loud cries on feeling the cold iron.

"Oh!" cried Eagle Head, in a tone of despair, "my son! restore me my son!"

"And your wife—do you forget her?" Belhumeur replied, with an ironical smile.

"What are your conditions?" Eagle Head asked.

CHAPTER XXV.

LOYAL HEART.

THE position was completely changed.

The hunters who a moment before were at the mercy of the Indians, felt they were not only in a manner free, but that they had it in their power to impose hard conditions.

Many guns were levelled in the direction of the Canadian—many arrows were

pointed towards him; but, at a signal from Eagle Head, the guns were recovered, and the arrows were returned to the quivers.

For the sake of his children or his wife, the fiercest warrior would not hesitate to make concessions which the most frightful tortures, under other circumstances, could not force from him. Thus, at the sight of his wife and child fallen into the power of Belhumeur, Eagle Head only thought of their safety.

The Comanche chief concealed in the depths of his heart the hatred and anger which devoured him. With a movement full of nobleness and disinterestedness, he threw back the blanket which served him as a cloak, and with a calm countenance and a smile on his lips, he approached the hunters.

The latter, long accustomed to the mode of action of the red-skins, remained in appearance impassible, awaiting the result of their bold *coup de main*.

"My pale brothers," the chief said, "are full of wisdom, though their hair is black; they are acquainted with all the stratagems familiar to warriors; they have the cunning of the beaver and the courage of the lion."

The two men bowed in silence, and Eagle Head continued—

"As my brother Loyal Heart is in the camp of the Comanches of the great lakes, the hour has at length arrived for dispersing the clouds which have arisen between him and the red-skins. Loyal Heart is just; let him explain himself without fear; he is in the presence of renowned chiefs, who will not hesitate to acknowledge their wrongs, if they have any towards him."

"Oh! oh!" the Canadian replied with a sneer; "Eagle Head has quickly changed his sentiments with respect to us: does he believe he can deceive us?"

A flash of hatred sparkled in the savage eye of the Indian; but, with an extraordinary effort, he succeeded in restraining himself.

Suddenly a man stepped between the interlocutors.

This man was Eshis, the most highly venerated warrior of the tribe.

The old man slowly raised his arm.

"Let my children listen to me," he said; "everything should be cleared up to-day; the pale hunters will smoke the calumet in council."

"Be it so," said Loyal Heart.

Upon a signal from the Sun the principal chiefs of the tribe came and ranged themselves around him.

Belhumeur had not changed his position; he was ready, at the slightest doubtful gesture, to sacrifice his prisoners.

When the pipe had gone the round of the circle formed near the hunters, the old chief collected himself; then, after bowing to the whites, he spoke as follows—

"Warriors, I thank the Master of Life for loving us red-skins, and for having this day sent us two pale men, who may at length open their hearts. Take courage, young men; do not allow yourselves to be cast down, and drive away the evil spirit far from you. We love you, Loyal Heart; we have heard of your humanity towards Indians. We believe that your heart is open, and that your veins flow clear as the sun. It is true that we Indians have not much sense when the fire-water has power over us, and that we may have displeased you in various circumstances. But we hope you will think no more of it; and that, as long as you and we shall be in the prairies, we shall hunt side by side, as warriors who respect and love each other ought to do."

To which Loyal Heart replied—

"You, chiefs and other members of the nation of the Comanches of the great lakes, whose eyes are opened, I hope you will lend an ear to the words of my mouth. The Master of Life has opened my brain, and caused friendly words to be breathed into my breast. My heart is filled with feelings for you, your wives, and your children; and what I say to you now proceeds from the roots of the feelings of

myself and my friend. Never in the prairie has my hatto been closed against the hunters of your nation. Why then do you make war against us? Why should you torture my mother, who is an old woman, and seek to deprive me of life? I am averse to the shedding of Indian blood; for, I repeat to you, that notwithstanding all the ill you have done me, my heart leaps towards you!"

"Wah!" interrupted Eagle Head; "my brother speaks well: but the wound he inflicted upon me is not yet healed."

"My brother is foolish," the hunter replied; "does he think me so unskilful that I could not have killed him, if such had been my intention? I will prove to you what I am capable of, and what I understand by the courage of a warrior. If I make but a sign, that woman and that child *will have ceased to live!*"

"Yes!" Belhumeur added.

A shudder ran through the ranks of the assembly. Eagle Head felt a cold perspiration peeling on his temples.

Loyal Heart preserved silence for a minute, fixing an undefinable look upon the Indians; then, raising his shoulders with disdain, he threw his weapons at his feet, and crossing his arms upon his breast, he turned towards the Canadian.

"Belhumeur," he said, in a calm, clear voice, "restore these two poor creatures to liberty."

"How can you dream of such a thing?" cried the hunter; "it would be your sentence of death!"

"I know it would."

"Well?"

"I beg you to do it."

The Canadian made no reply. He began to whistle between his teeth, and, drawing his knife, he, at a stroke, cut the bonds which confined his captives, who bounded away like jaguars, uttering howlings of joy, to conceal themselves among their friends. He then replaced his knife in his belt, threw down his weapons, dismounted, and went and placed himself resolutely by the side of Loyal Heart.

"What are you doing?" the latter cried. "Make your escape, my friend."

"What! save myself and leave you?" the Canadian replied. "No, thank you. As I must die once, I had quite as lief it should be to-day as hereafter. I shall never, perhaps, find so good an opportunity."

The two men shook hands with an energetic grip.

"Now, chiefs," Loyal Heart said, addressing the Indians in his clear, calm voice, "we are in your power, do with us as you think proper."

The Comanches looked at each other for an instant in a state of stupor. The stoical abnegation of these two men, who, by the bold action of one of them, might not only have escaped, but have dictated terms to them, and who, instead of profiting by this immense advantage, threw down their weapons and delivered themselves into their hands, appeared to them to exceed all instances of heroism celebrated in their nation.

There followed a long silence.

At length Eagle Head, after a little hesitation, threw down his arms, and approaching the hunters, said, in an agitated voice—

"It is true, warriors of the pale-faces, that you have great sense, that it sweetens the words you address to us, and that we all understand you; we know also that truth opens your lips. It is very difficult for us Indians, who have not the reason of the whites, to avoid often committing, without wishing to do so, reprehensible actions; but we hope that Loyal Heart will take the skin from his heart, so that it may be as clear as ours, and that between us the hatchet may be buried so deeply that the sons of the sons of his grandsons, in a thousand moons and a hundred more, will not be able to find it."

And placing his two hands upon the shoulders of the hunter, he kissed him upon the eyes, adding—

"May Loyal Heart be my brother!"

"Be it so!" said the hunter, rejoiced at this conclusion; "henceforth I shall entertain for the Comanches as much friendship as, up to this time, I have had mistrust."

The Indian chiefs crowded round their new friends, upon whom they lavished, with the ingenuousness that characterises primitive natures, marks of affection and respect.

The two hunters had been long known in the tribe of the Serpent; their reputation was established. Often at night, around their camp-fire, their exploits had struck with admiration the young men to whom the old warriors related them.

The reconciliation was frank between Loyal Heart and Eagle Head; there did not remain between them the least trace of their past hatred. The heroism of the white hunter had conquered the animosity of the red-skin warrior.

The two men were chatting, peaceably seated at the entrance of a hut, when a great cry was heard, and an Indian, with his features distorted by terror, rushed into the camp.

All crowded round this man to learn his news; but the Indian, perceiving Eagle Head, advanced towards him.

"What is going on?" the chief asked.

The Indian cast a ferocious look at Loyal Heart and Belhumeur, who had no more idea than the others of the cause of this panic.

"Take care that these two pale-faces do not escape; we are betrayed," he said, in a broken voice.

"Let my brother explain himself more clearly," said Eagle Head.

"All the white trappers, the long knives of the west, are assembled; they form a war detachment of near a hundred men; they are advancing and spreading themselves in such a manner as to invest the camp on all sides at once."

"Are you sure these hunters come as enemies?" said the chief again.

"What else can they be?" the Indian warrior replied. "They are creeping like serpents through the high grass, with their guns before them, and their scalping-knives in their teeth. Chief, we are betrayed; these men have been sent to lull us to sleep."

Eagle Head and Loyal Heart exchanged a glance of an undefinable expression, and which was an enigma for all but themselves.

The Comanche chief turned towards the Indian.

"Did you see," he said, "who marched at the head of the hunters?"

"Yes, I saw him. It was Black Elk, the principal guardian of Loyal Heart's traps."

"Very well! Retire," said the warrior, dismissing the messenger with a nod of the head; then addressing the hunter, he asked,

"What is to be done?"

"Nothing," Loyal Heart replied; "this concerns me; my brother must leave me to act alone."

"My brother is master!"

"I will go and meet these hunters; let Eagle Head keep his young men in the camp till my return."

"That shall be done."

Loyal Heart threw his gun upon his shoulder, gave Belhumeur a shake of the hand, and a smile to the Comanche chief, and then directed his course to the forest, at that pace, at once firm and easy, which was habitual to him.

He soon disappeared among the trees.

"Hum," said Belhumeur, lighting his Indian pipe; "you see, chief, that in this world, it is not a bad speculation to allow ourselves to be guided by our hearts."

And satisfied beyond measure with this philosophical fancy, which appeared to him quite to the purpose, the Canadian enveloped himself in a thick cloud of smoke.

By the orders of the chief, all the sentinels spread round the outskirts of the camp were called in.

The Indians awaited with impatience the result of Loyal Heart's proceedings.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PIRATES.

It was evening, at a distance nearly equal from the two camps.

Concealed in a ravine deeply enclosed between two hills, about forty men were assembled around several fires, dispersed in such a manner that the light of the flames could not betray their presence.

These men were what people have agreed to call the pirates of the prairies.

A denomination which suits them in every way, since, like their brothers of the ocean, hoisting all colours, or rather trampling them all under foot, they fall upon every traveller who ventures to cross the prairies alone, attack and plunder caravans, and when all other prey escapes them, they hide themselves traitorously in the high grass to entrap the Indians, whom they assassinate in order to gain the premium which the paternal government of the United States gives for every aboriginal scalp, as in France they pay for the head of a wolf.

This troop was commanded by Captain Waktehno.

Some were cleaning and loading their arms, others mending their clothes; some were smoking and drinking mezcal, others were asleep, folded in their ragged cloaks.

The horses, all saddled and ready for mounting, were fastened to piquets.

At stated distances, sentinels, leaning on their long rifles, silent and motionless as statues of bronze, watched over the safety of all.

The dying flashes of the fires, which were expiring by degrees, threw a reddish reflection upon this picture that gave the pirates a still fiercer aspect.

The captain appeared a prey to extreme anxiety; he walked with long strides among his subordinates, stamping his foot with anger, and stopping at intervals to listen to the sound of the prairies.

The night became darker and darker, the moon had disappeared, the wind moaned hoarsely among the hills, and the pirates had all fallen asleep one after another.

The captain alone still watched.

All at once he fancied that he heard at a distance the report of fire-arms, then a second, and all again was silent.

"What does this mean?" the captain murmured, angrily; "have my rascals allowed themselves to be surprised?"

Then, folding himself carefully in his cloak, he hastily directed his course to the side whence the reports appeared to come.

The darkness was intense; and, notwithstanding his knowledge of the country, the captain could only advance with difficulty through brambles, thistles, and briars, which, at every step, impeded his progress. He was several times obliged to stop and look about him to be sure of his route, from which the turnings and windings necessitated by blocks of rock and thickets continually diverted him.

During one of these halts, he fancied he could perceive, at a small distance from him, the rustling of leaves and boughs, like that which is produced by the passage of a man or a wild beast through underwood.

The captain concealed himself behind the trunk of a gigantic acajou, drew his pistols, and cocked them, in order to be prepared for whatever might happen; then, bending his head forward, he listened.

All was calm around him; it was that mysterious time of night when Nature seems to sleep, and when all the nameless sounds of the solitude are quieted down, so that, as the Indians express it, nothing is to be heard but silence.

"I must have been deceived," the pirate muttered; and he began to retrace his steps. But, at that moment, the noise was repeated, and was immediately followed by a stifled groan.

"The devil!" said the captain; "this begins to be interesting; I must clear this up."

After a hasty movement forward of a few steps, he saw, gliding along, at a short distance from him, the scarcely distinguishable shadow of a man. This person, whoever he was, seemed to walk with difficulty, he staggered at every step, and stopped at intervals, as if to recover strength. He frequently allowed a smothered complaint to escape him. The captain sprang forward. When the unknown perceived him, he uttered a cry of terror, and fell on his knees, murmuring in a voice broken by terror—

"Pardon! pardon! do not kill me!"

"Why!" exclaimed the astonished captain, "it is the Babblor! Who the devil has treated him in this fashion?"

And he bent over him. He had fainted.

"Plague stifle the fool!" the captain muttered, with vexation. "What's the use of asking him anything now?"

But the pirate was a man of resources; he replaced his pistols in his belt, and raising the wounded man, he threw him over his shoulders.

Loaded with his burden, which scarcely seemed to lessen his speed, he hastily returned to the camp by the way he had left it.

He deposited the guide close to a half-extinguished brazier, into which he threw an armful of dry wood to revive it. A clear blaze soon enabled him to examine the man who lay senseless at his feet.

The features of the Babblor were livid, a cold perspiration stood in drops upon his temples, and the blood flowed in abundance from a wound in his breast.

"*Cascaras!*" the captain muttered; "here is a poor devil who has got his business done! I hope before he departs he will, however, tell me who has done him this favour, and what has become of Kennedy!"

Like all the wood-rangers, the captain possessed a small practical knowledge of medicine; and, thanks to the attentions he lavished on the bandit, the latter was not long in coming to himself. He breathed a heavy sigh, opened his haggard eyes, but remained for some time unable to speak; after several fruitless efforts, however, aided by the captain, he succeeded in sitting up, and shaking his head repeatedly, he murmured in a low, broken voice—

"All is lost, captain! Our plan has failed!"

"A thousand thunders!" the captain cried, stamping his feet with rage. "How has this happened?"

"The girl is a demon!" the guide replied, whose difficult respiration and gradually weaker voice showed that he had but a few minutes to live.

"If you can manage, anyhow," said the captain, who had understood nothing by the exclamation of the wounded man, "tell me how things have gone on, and who is your assassin, that I may avenge you."

"The name of my assassin?" he said, in an ironical tone, "is Dona Luz."

"Dona Luz!" the captain cried, starting with surprise, "impossible!"

"Listen," the guide resumed; "my moments are numbered; I shall soon be a dead man. In my position people don't lie. Let me speak without interrupting me. I don't know whether I shall have time to tell you all, before I go to render my account to Him who knows everything."

"Speak!" said the captain.

And, as the voice of the wounded man became weaker and weaker, he ~~went~~ *fell* down upon his knees.

The guide closed his eyes, collected himself for a few seconds, and, then, with great effort, said—

"Give me some brandy."

"You must be mad! brandy will kill you!"

The wounded man shook his head.

"It will give me the necessary strength to enable me to tell you all I have to say. Am I not already half dead!"

"That's true," muttered the captain.

"Do not hesitate, then," the wounded man replied, who had heard him; "time presses; I have important things to inform you of."

"If it must be so, it must," said the captain, after a moment's hesitation; and taking his gourd, he applied it to the lips of the guide.

The latter drank eagerly and copiously; a feverish flush coloured his hollow cheeks, his eyes flashed and gleamed with an unnatural fire.

"Now," he said, in a pretty loud voice, "do not interrupt me; when you see me become weak, let me drink again. I, perhaps, shall have time to tell you all."

The captain made a sign of assent, and the Babbler began.

His recital was rendered long by the repeated weakness with which he was seized; when it was terminated, he added—

"You see that this woman is a demon; she has killed both Kennedy and me. Renounce the capture of her, captain; she is game you cannot bring down; you will never get possession of her."

"Hum," said the captain; "do you imagine that I give up my projects in that fashion?"

"I wish you luck, then," the guide murmured; "as for me, my business is done—my account is settled. Adieu, captain," he added, with a strange sort of smile; "I am going to all the devils—we shall meet again yonder."

And he sank back dead.

"A good journey to you!" the captain muttered, carelessly. He took the corpse upon his shoulders, carried it into a thicket, in the middle of which he made a hole, and placed it in it; then, this operation being achieved in a few minutes, he returned to the fire, wrapped himself in his cloak, stretched himself on the sod, with his feet towards the brazier, and fell asleep, saying—

"In a few hours it will be light, and we will then see what we have to do."

Bandits do not sleep late. At sunrise all were on the alert in the camp of the pirates.

The captain, far from renouncing his projects, had, on the contrary, determined to hasten the execution of them, so as not to allow the Mexicans time to find among the white trappers of the prairies auxiliaries who might render success impossible.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DEVOTEDNESS.

As we said, the doctor had left the camp, charged by Dona Luz with a message for Black Elk.

Like all learned men, the doctor was absent by nature, and that with the best intentions in the world.

During the first moments, according to the custom of his brethren, he puzzled his brain to endeavour to make out the signification of the words, somewhat cabalistical in his opinion, that he was to repeat to the trapper.

He could not comprehend what assistance his friends could possibly obtain from a half-wild man, who lived alone in the prairie, and whose existence was passed in hunting and trapping.

If he had accepted this mission so promptly, the profound friendship he professed for the niece of the general was the sole cause: although he expected no advantageous result from it, as we have said, he had set out resolutely, convinced that the certainty of his departure would calm the uneasiness of the young lady. In short, he had rather meant to satisfy the caprice of a patient than undertake a serious affair.

In the persuasion, therefore, that the mission with which he was charged was a useless one, instead of going full speed, as he ought to have done, to the toldo of Black Elk, he dismounted, passed his arm through his bridle, and began to look for simples, an occupation which, ere long, so completely absorbed him, that he entirely forgot the instructions of Dona Luz, and the reason why he had left the camp.

In the meanwhile time passed slowly because anxiously; half the day was gone, and the doctor, who ought long before to have returned, did not appear.

The uneasiness became great in the camp, where the general and the captain had organised everything for a vigorous defence in case of attack.

But nothing appeared.

The greatest calm continued to prevail in the environs; the Mexicans were not far from thinking the whole a false alarm.

Dona Luz alone felt her uneasiness increase every instant; with her eyes fixed upon the plain, she looked in vain in the direction her expected messengers should arrive by.

All at once, it struck her that the high grass of the prairie had an oscillating motion which was not natural.

There was not a breath of air; a heavy, stifling heat weighed down all nature; the leaves of the trees, scorched by the sun, were still; the high grass alone, agitated by a mysterious movement, continued to oscillate.

And, what was most extraordinary, this almost imperceptible motion, which required close attention to be observed, was not general; on the contrary, it was successive, approaching the camp by degrees, with a regularity which gave reason for supposing an organised impulsion; so that, in proportion as it was communicated to the nearest grass, the most distant returned by degrees to a state of complete immobility, from which it did not change.

The sentinels placed in the intrenchments could not tell to what to attribute this movement, of which they understood nothing.

The general, as an experienced soldier, resolved to know what it meant; although he had never personally had to do with the Indians, he had heard too much of their manner of fighting not to suspect some stratagem.

Not wishing to weaken the camp, which stood in need of all its defenders, he resolved himself to undertake the adventure, and go out on the scout.

At the instant he was about to climb over the intrenchments, the captain stopped him, by placing his hand respectfully on his shoulders.

"What do you want with me, my friend?" the general asked, turning round.

"You are leaving the camp?"

"I am."

"To go in search of intelligence, no doubt?"

"I admit that is my intention."

"Then, general, it is to me that mission belongs."

"Ay! how is that?" said the astonished general.

"Good God! general, that is very plain; I am but a poor devil of an officer, and owe everything to you."

"What then?"

"The peril I shall run, if peril there be, will not in any way compromise the success of the expedition; whereas——"

"If you are killed."

The general started.

"Everything must be foreseen and provided for," continued the captain, "when we have before us such adversaries as those that threaten us."

"That is true. What then?"

"Well, the expedition will fail, and not one of us will ever see a civilised country again. You are the head; we are but the arms; remain, therefore, in the camp."

The general reflected for a few seconds; then pressing the hand of the young man cordially, he said—

"Thank you, but I must see for myself what is being plotted against us. The circumstance is too serious to allow me to trust even to you."

"You must remain in the camp, general," persisted the captain, "if not for our sake, at least for that of your niece, that innocent and delicate creature, who, if any misfortune should happen to you, would find herself alone, abandoned amidst ferocious tribes, without support, and without a protector. Of what consequence is my life to me, a poor lad without a family, who owes everything to your kindness?"

"But——" the general tried to speak.

"You know," the young man continued, warmly, "if I could take your place with Dona Luz, I would do it with joy; but I am as yet too young to play that noble part. Come, general, let me go instead of you."

Half by persuasion, half by force, he succeeded in drawing the old soldier back; he sprang upon the intrenchments, leaped down on the other side, and set off at full speed, after making a last sign of farewell.

The general looked after him; then he passed his hand across his careful brow, murmuring—

"Brave boy! excellent nature!"

"Is he not, uncle?" Dona Luz replied, who had approached and listened without being seen.

"Ah! were you there, dear child?" he said, with a smile, which he endeavoured in vain to render cheerful.

"Yes, dear uncle, I have heard all."

"That is well, dear little one," the general said, with an effort; "but this is not the time to give way to feeling. I must think of your safety. Do not remain here longer; come with me."

Taking her by the hand, he led her affectionately to the tent.

After leading her in, he gave her a kiss upon her brow, advised her not to go out

again, and returned to the intrenchments, where he set himself to watch with the greatest care what was going on in the plain; calculating the while, mentally, the time that had passed since the departure of the doctor, and feeling astonished at not seeing him return.

"He must have fallen in with the Indians," he said; "I only hope they have not killed him."

Captain Aguilar was an intrepid soldier, trained in the incessant wars of Mexico; he knew how to unite prudence with courage.

When he arrived at a certain distance from the camp, he laid himself on the ground, face downwards, and reached, by creeping along thus, a rough piece of rock, admirably situated for concealment and observation.

Everything appeared quiet around him; nothing denoted the approach of an enemy. After spending a sufficient time in keenly exploring with his eyes the country beyond him, he was preparing to return to the camp, with a conviction that the general was deceived, and no imminent peril existed, when suddenly, within ten paces of him, an *asshata* bounded up in great terror, with ears erect and head thrown back, and fled away with extreme velocity.

"Oh! oh!" the young man said to himself, "there is something here, though."

Quitting the rock behind which he had been screened, he, with great precaution, advanced a few steps, in order to satisfy his suspicions.

The grass became powerfully agitated, half a score men arose suddenly from various points, and surrounded him before he had time to put himself on the defensive, or regain the shelter he had imprudently quitted.

"Well," he said, with disdainful coolness, "luckily I know now with whom I have to deal."

"Surrender!" one of the men nearest to him shouted.

"No, thank you," he replied, with an ironical smile. "You are fools if you expect that."

"Then we will kill you, my dainty spark," the first speaker answered, brutally.

"I reckon upon that," said the captain, in a jeering tone; "but I mean to defend myself; that will make a noise, my friends will hear us, your surprise will be a failure, and that is exactly what I wish."

These words were pronounced with a coolness that made the pirates pause. These men belonged to the band of Captain Wakteho, who was himself among them.

"Yes," retorted the captain of the bandits, "your idea is not a bad one, only you forget that we can kill you without making a noise."

"Bah! who knows?" said the young man, and before the pirates could prevent him, he made an extraordinary spring backwards, by which he upset two men, and ran with his best speed in the direction of the camp.

The first surprise over, the bandits darted forward in pursuit of him.

This trial of speed lasted a considerable time without the pirates being able to gain ground on the fugitive. Though not relaxing in the pursuit, as they tried as much as possible to avoid being seen by the Mexican sentinels, whom they hoped to surprise, they were obliged to make turnings which necessarily impeded their course.

The captain had arrived within hearing of his friends, and he cast a glance behind him. Profiting by a moment in which he had paused to take breath, the bandits had gained upon him considerably, and the young man became aware that if he continued to fly, he should cause the misfortune he wished to avoid.

His determination was formed in an instant; he was satisfied he must die, but he wished to die as a soldier, and make his fall useful to those for whom he devoted himself.

He placed his back against a tree, laid his matchete within reach, drew his pistols

from his belt, and facing the bandits, cried in a loud voice, in order to attract the attention of his friends—

"To arms! to arms! Be on your guard! The enemies are here!"

Then, with the greatest coolness, he discharged his weapons as if at a target—he had four double-barrelled pistols—shouting, as every pirate fell as loud as he could,

"To arms! the enemies are here! they will surround you! Be on your guard! Be on your guard!"

The bandits, exasperated by this brave defence, rushed upon him with great rage, forgetting all the precautions they had till that time taken.

Then commenced a horrible but an almost superhuman struggle of one man against twenty or thirty; for it seemed, as every pirate fell, that another took his place.

The conflict was fearful! The young man had determined to make the sacrifice of his life, but he was equally resolved to sell it dearly.

We have said that at every shot he fired he had uttered a warning cry; his pistols being discharged, at every stroke of his machete that he dealt he did the same, to which the Mexicans replied by keeping up, on their part, a rolling fire of musketry upon the pirates, who showed themselves openly, blindly bent upon the destruction of a man who so audaciously barred their passage with the impenetrable barrier of his loyal breast.

At length the captain was brought down on one knee. The pirates rushed upon him, pell-mell, wounding each other in their frantic efforts to destroy him.

Such a combat could not last long.

Captain Aguilar fell, but in falling he drew with him a dozen pirates he had immolated, and who formed a bloody escort on his passage to the tomb.

"Hum!" muttered Captain Wakteho, surveying him with admiration, whilst staunching the blood of a large wound he had received in the breast, "a roughish sort of fellow! If the others are like him, we shall have more than our work to do. Come!" he continued, turning towards his companions, who awaited his orders, "do not let us stand here any longer to be shot at like pigeons. To the assault, in God's name!—to the assault!"

The pirates rushed after him, brandishing their arms, and began to climb the rock, vociferating, "To the assault! to the assault!"

On their side, the Mexicans, witnesses of the heroic death of Captain Aguilar, prepared to avenge him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DOCTOR.

WHILST these terrible events were being accomplished the doctor had forgotten everything but the thoughts of the ample harvest he could make. He proceeded with his body bent towards the ground, stopping for a long time before every plant he admired, ere he resolved to pull it up.

When he had loaded himself with an infinite number of plants and herbs exceedingly valuable to him, he resolved at length to seat himself quietly at the foot of a tree, and classify them at his ease, with all the care that celebrated professors are accustomed to bring to this delicate operation, nibbling in the meantime some morsels of biscuit which he drew from his bag.

He remained a long time absorbed in this occupation, which procured him one of those extreme delights which the learned alone can enjoy, and which are unknown

in the vulgar. He would probably have forgotten himself in this labour until night had surprised him, and forced him to seek shelter, had not a dark shadow come between him and the sun, and projected its reflection upon the plants he had classified with so much care.

He mechanically raised his head.

A man, leaning on a long rifle, had stopped before him, and was contemplating him with a kind of laughing attention. This man was Black Elk.

"He! he!" he said to the doctor; "what are you doing there? Seeing the grass moving I thought there was a doe in the thicket, and, devil take me! if I was not on the point of sending a bullet at you."

"The deuce!" the doctor cried; "you should be careful; you might have killed me?"

"Well, I might," the trapper replied, laughing; "but don't be afraid. I perceived my error in time."

"God be praised!"

And the doctor, who had just perceived a rare plant, stooped eagerly to seize it.

"Then you won't tell me what you are doing?" the hunter continued.

"Why, can't you see, my friend?"

"Who, I? Yes; I see you are amusing yourself with pulling up the weeds of the prairie, that is all."

"Oh! ignorance!" the savant murmured, and then added aloud with that tone of doctorial condescension peculiar to the disciples of Esculapius, "my friend, I am gathering simples, which I collect, in order to classify them in my herbal; the *flora* of these prairies is magnificent; I am convinced that I have discovered at least three new species of the *Chirostemon pentadactylon*, of which the genus belongs to the *Flora Mexicana*."

"Ah!" said the hunter, staring with all his eyes, and making strong efforts to refrain from laughing in the doctor's face. "You think you have really found three new species of—"

"*Chirostemon pentadactylon*, my friend," said the doctor, patronisingly.

"Ah! bah!"

"At least; perhaps there may be a fourth!"

"Oh! oh! there is some use in it then?"

"Some use in it, indeed!" the doctor cried.

"Well, don't be angry, I know nothing about it."

"That is true!" said the savant, softened by the tone of Black Elk; "You cannot comprehend the importance of these labours, which advance science at an immense speed."

"Well, only to think! And it was only for the purpose of pulling up herbs in this manner that you came into the prairie?"

"For nothing else."

Black Elk looked at him with the admiration created by the sight of an inexplicable phenomenon; the hunter could not succeed in comprehending how a sensible man should resolve willingly to endure a life of privation and perils for the, to him, unintelligible object of pulling up useless plants; therefore he soon came to a conviction that he must be mad. He cast upon him a look of commiseration; shaking his head, and shouldering his rifle, he prepared to go on his way.

"Well! well!" he said, in the tone usually employed towards children and idiots; "you are right, my good sir; pull away! pull away! you do nobody any harm, and there will always be plenty left. I wish you good sport, such as it is. I shall see you again."

And, whistling his dogs, he proceeded a few steps, but almost immediately returned.

"One word more," he said, addressing the doctor, who had already forgotten him, and was again busied in the employment which the arrival of the hunter had forced him to interrupt.

"Speak!" he replied, raising his head.

"I hope that the young lady who came to visit my hatto yesterday, in company with her uncle, is well?"

The doctor rose up suddenly, striking his forehead.

"Fool that I am!" he cried, "I had completely forgotten it."

"Forgotten what?" the astonished hunter asked.

"This is always my way!" the savant muttered; "fortunately the mischief is not great."

"What mischief are you talking about?" said the trapper, beginning to feel uneasy.

"You may imagine," the doctor continued, quietly, "that if science absorbs me so completely as to make me often forget to eat and drink, I am likely sometimes not to remember the commissions I am charged with."

"To the point! to the point! did you leave the camp at daybreak?" said the hunter.

"Good Heavens, yes!"

"And do you know what o'clock it is now?"

The savant looked at the sun.

"Almost three!" he said; "but I repeat that it is of little consequence. You being here, I can report to you what Dona Luz charged me to tell you, and all will be right, no doubt."

"God grant that your negligence may not prove the cause of a great misfortune," said the hunter.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You will soon know. I hope I may be deceived. Speak, I am listening to you."

"This is what Dona Luz begged me to repeat to you——"

"Was it Dona Luz that sent you to me?"

"Herself!"

"Has anything serious taken place at the camp?"

"Ah! why, yes; and that, perhaps, may make it more important than I at first imagined. This is what has happened: Last night one of our guides——"

"The Babbler?"

"The same. Do you know him?"

"Yes. Go on."

"Well! It appears that the man was plotting with another bandit of his own sort, to deliver up the camp to the Indians. Dona Luz, most probably by chance, overheard the conversation of these fellows, and, at the moment they were passing her, she fired two pistols at them, quite close."

"Did she kill them?"

"Unfortunately, no. One of them, although no doubt grievously wounded, was able to escape."

"Which of them?"

"The Babbler."

"Well, and then?"

"Why, then Dona Luz made me swear to come to you, and say——stop a bit," said the savant, trying to recollect the words.

"Black Elk, the hour is come!" the hunter impetuously interrupted.

"That's it! that's it!" said the savant, rubbing his hands for joy; "I had it at the tip of my tongue. I must confess it appeared rather obscure to me; I could not fancy what it meant."

The hunter seized him vigorously by the arm, and drawing his face close to his own, he said, with an inflamed look and features contracted by anger—

"Wretched madman! why do you not come to me as quickly as possible, instead of wasting your time like an idiot? Your delay will, perhaps, cause the death of all your friends!"

"Is it possible!" cried the chap-fallen doctor.

"You were charged with a message of life and death, fool that you are! Now, what is to be done? Perhaps it is too late!"

"Oh! do not say so," said the savant, in great agitation, "I should die with despair if it were so."

The poor man burst into tears, and Black Elk was obliged to console him.

"Come, come, courage, my good sir!" he said, softening a little. "What the devil! perhaps all is not lost."

"Oh! if I were the cause of such a misfortune, I should never survive it!"

"Well, what is done is done; we must act accordingly," said the trapper philosophically. "I will think how they are to be assisted. Thanks be to God, I am not so much alone as might be supposed—I hope within two hours to have got together thirty of the best rifles in the prairies."

"You will save them, will you not?"

"At least, I will do all that can be done, and, if it please God, I shall succeed."

"May Heaven hear you!"

"Amen!" said the hunter, crossing himself devoutly. "Now, listen to me; you must return to the camp."

"Immediately!"

"But no more gathering of flowers, or pulling up of grass, if you please."

"Oh, I swear I will not. Cursed be the hour in which I set myself to herbalise!" said the doctor.

"Very well, that's agreed. You must comfort the young lady as well as her uncle; you must recommend them to keep good guard, and, in case of an attack, to make a vigorous resistance; and tell them they shall soon see friends come to their assistance."

"I will tell them all that."

"To horse, then, and gallop all the way to the camp."

"Be satisfied, I will; but you, what are you going to do?"

"Oh! don't trouble yourself about me. I shall not be idle; all you have to do is to rejoin your friends as soon as possible."

"Within an hour I shall be with them."

"Courage and good luck, then!"

Black Elk let go the bridle which he had seized, and the doctor set off at a gallop, a pace to which the good man was so little accustomed, that he had great trouble to preserve his equilibrium.

The trapper watched his departure for an instant, and then he strode with hasty steps into the forest.

He had scarcely walked ten minutes when he met Nô Eusebio, who was conveying the mother of Loyal Heart, across his saddle, in a fainting state.

This meeting was for the trapper a piece of good fortune, of which he took advantage to obtain from the old Spaniard some positive information about the hunter.

The two men then repaired to the hatto of the trapper, from which they were but a short distance, and in which they wished to place the mother of their friend for the present.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE ALLIANCE.

LOYAL HEART, after walking straight forward about ten minutes, without giving himself the trouble to follow one of those innumerable paths that intersect the prairie in all directions, stopped, put the butt-end of his gun to the ground, looked round carefully on all sides, lent his ear to those thousands of noises of the desert which all have a meaning for the man accustomed to a prairie life; and, probably satisfied with the result of his observations, he imitated, at three different equal intervals, the cry of the jay, with such perfection, that several of those birds, concealed among the thickest of the trees, replied to him immediately.

The third cry had scarcely ceased to vibrate in the air, ere the forest, mute till that moment, and apparently plunged in complete solitude, became animated as if by enchantment.

On all sides arose, from the midst of bushes and grass, in which they had been concealed, a crowd of hunters with energetic countenances and picturesque costumes, who formed, in an instant, a dense crowd round the trapper.

It chanced that the two first faces that caught the eye of **Loyal Heart** were those of **Black Elk** and **Nô Eusebio**, both posted at a few paces from him.

"Oh!" he said, holding out his hand eagerly; "I understand it all my friends. Thanks! a thousand thanks for your cordial coming; but, praise be to God! your succour is not necessary."

"So much the better!" said **Black Elk**.

"But how did you get out of the hands of those devilish red-skins?" the old servant asked, eagerly.

"Don't speak ill of the Comanches," **Loyal Heart** replied, with a smile; "they are now my brothers,"

"Do you speak seriously?" cried **Black Elk**; "can you really be on good terms with the Indians?"

"You shall judge for yourself. Peace is made between them and me, my friends. If agreeable to you, I will introduce you to each other."

"By Heaven! at the present moment nothing could fall out more fortunately," said **Black Elk**; "and as you are free, we shall be able to concern ourselves for other people, who are now in great peril and in need of our immediate assistance."

"What do you mean?" **Loyal Heart** asked.

"I mean, that some people to whom you have already rendered great services, on the occasion of the last fire in the prairie, are at this moment surrounded by a band of pirates, who will soon attack them, if they have not already done so."

"We must fly to their assistance!" cried **Loyal Heart**, with an emotion he could not control.

"Well, that was our intention; but we wished to deliver you first, **Loyal Heart**. You are the soul of our band; without you we should have done no good."

"Thanks! my friends. But now, you see, I am free, so there is nothing to stop us; let us set forward immediately."

"I crave your pardon," **Black Elk** replied; "but we have to deal with a strong body. The pirates, who know they have no pity to look for, fight like so many tigers. The more numerous we are, the better will be our chance of success."

"That is true; but what do you aim at?"

"At this—since you have made, in our name, peace with the Indians, it could be so managed that they——"

"By Heavens! you are right, Black Elk," Loyal Heart interrupted him, eagerly. "I did not think of that. The Indian warriors will be delighted at the opportunity we shall offer them of showing their valour. They will joyfully assist us in our expedition. Follow me. I will present you to my new friends."

The trappers drew together, and formed a compact band of forty men.

Arms were reversed, in sign of peace, and all, following the steps of the hunter, directed their course towards the camp of the Comanches.

"And my mother?" Loyal Heart asked Eusebio, with a broken voice.

"She is in safety in the hatto of Black Elk."

"And how is she?"

"As well as you could expect, though suffering from great uneasiness," the old man replied. "Your mother is a woman who only lives by the heart. She is endowed with immense courage; the greatest physical pains glide over her. She now feels but slightly the effects of the tortures she had begun to undergo."

"God be praised! But she must no longer be left in these mortal doubts; where is your horse?"

"Hidden, close by."

"Mount, and then return to my mother. Assure her of my safety, and then both of you retire to the grotto of Verdigris, where she will be out of all danger. You will remain with her. That grotto is easily found; it is situated at a small distance from the rock of the Dead Buffalo. When you get there, you have nothing to do but to let loose my *rastreros*, which I will leave you, and they will lead you straight to it. Do you clearly understand me?"

"Perfectly."

"Begone then. Here we are at the camp; your presence is useless here, whilst yonder it is indispensable."

Nô Eusebio whistled the blood-hounds, which he leashed together; he then, after another shake of the hand with his young master, left the troop, turned to the right, and resumed the way to the forest. The hunters, in the meantime, arrived at the entrance of the glade in which was the camp of the Indians.

The Comanches formed, a few paces behind the first lines of their camp, a vast semicircle, in the centre of which stood their chiefs.

To do honour to their newly-arrived friends, they had put on their handsomest costumes. They were painted and armed for war.

Loyal Heart halted his troop, and continuing to march on alone, he unfolded a buffalo robe, which he waved before him.

Eagle Head then quitted the other chiefs, and advanced on his part to meet the hunter, also waving a buffalo robe in sign of peace.

When the two men were within three paces of each other, they stopped. Loyal Heart spoke the first.

"The Master of Life," he said, "sees into our hearts. He knows that among us the road is good and open, and that the words which our lungs breathe, and our mouths pronounce, are sincere. The white hunters come to visit their red friends."

"They are welcome!" Eagle Head replied, cordially.

After these words the Comanches and the hunters discharged their pieces into the air, amidst long and loud cries of joy. Then all ceremony was banished; the two bands mingled, and were confounded so thoroughly that, at the end of a few minutes, they only formed one.

Loyal Heart, however, who knew from what Black Elk had told him how precious the moments were, took Eagle Head aside, and explained to him frankly what he expected from his rite.

The chief smiled at this request.

"My brother shall be satisfied," he said, "let him but wait a little."

Leaving the hunter, he joined the other chiefs. The crier quickly mounted upon the roof of a hut, and convoked, with loud cries, the most renowned warriors to a meeting in the hut of council.

The demand of Loyal Heart met with general approbation. Ninety chosen warriors, commanded by Eagle Head, were selected to accompany the hunters, and co-operate with all their power to secure the success of the expedition.

When the decision of the chiefs was made known, it created a general joy throughout the tribe.

The allies were to set forward at sunset, in order to surprise the enemy.

The great war-dance, with all the ceremonies usual upon such occasions, was danced, the warriors the while continually repeating in chorus—

“Master of Life, look upon me with a favourable eye; thou hast given me the courage to open my veins.”

When they were on the point of setting out, Eagle Head, who knew what dangerous enemies they were going to attack, selected twenty warriors upon whom he could depend, and sent them forward as scouts, after having given them some scotte wigwas, or bark wood, in order that they might immediately light a fire as a warning in case of alarm.

He then examined the arms of his warriors, and, being satisfied, gave orders for departure.

The Comanches and the trappers took the Indian file, and, preceded by their respective chiefs, they quitted the camp, amidst the good wishes and exhortations of their friends, who accompanied them to the first trees of the forest.

The little army consisted of a hundred and thirty resolute men, perfectly armed, and commanded by chiefs whom no obstacle or peril could make recede.

The darkness was dense; the moon, veiled by large black clouds, which floated heavily in space, only shed at intervals a dull, rayless light, which, when it disappeared, gave objects a fantastic appearance.

The wind blew in gusts, and filled the ravines with dull, plaintive moans.

The warriors marched in silence; they looked in the darkness like a crowd of phantoms escaped from a sepulchre, hastening to accomplish a work without a name, which night alone could veil with its shadow.

At midnight the word “halt” was pronounced in a low voice, and they encamped to await news of the scouts.

That is to say, every one, whether well or ill-placed, laid himself down exactly where he happened to be, in order to be ready at the first signal.

No fire was lighted.

The Indians, who depend upon their scouts, never post sentinels when they are upon the war-path.

Two hours passed away.

The camp of the Mexicans was not more than three miles distant at most; but, before venturing nearer, the chief wished to ascertain whether the route were free or not; in case it should not be so, what were the numbers of the enemy who barred the passage, and what plan of attack they had adopted.

At the moment when Loyal Heart, a prey to impatience, was preparing to go himself to ascertain what was going on, a rustling, almost imperceptible at first, but which by degrees increased in enormous proportions, was heard in the bushes, and two men appeared.

The first was one of the Comanche scouts, the other was the doctor.

The state of the poor savant was truly pitiable.

He had lost his wig: his clothes were in rags; his face was convulsed with terror; in short, his whole person bore evident traces of struggle and combat.

When he was brought before Loyal Heart and Eagle Head, he fell head-foremost to the ground and fainted.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LAST ASSAULT.

THE lanceros posted behind the intrenchments had received the pirates warmly.

The general, exasperated by the death of Captain Aguilar, and perceiving that with such enemies there was no quarter to be expected, had resolved to kill himself rather than fall into their hands.

The Mexicans, reckoning the peons and guides, in whom they scarcely dared to trust, amounted to only seventeen, men and women included.

The pirates were at least thirty.

The numerical disproportion was then great between the besiegers and the besieged; but thanks to the strong position of the camp, situated on the summit of a chaos of rocks, this disproportion partly disappeared.

Captain Waktehno had not for an instant deceived himself with regard to the difficulties of the attack he meditated—difficulties almost insurmountable in an open assault; therefore he had depended upon a surprise, and more particularly upon the treachery of the Babblcr. It was only from having been carried away by circumstances, and being furious at the loss Captain Aguilar had caused him, that he had ventured upon an assault.

But the first moment of effervescence over, when he saw his men falling around him like ripe fruit, unrevenged, and without gaining an inch of ground, he resolved not to retreat, but to change the siege into a blockade.

He believed himself certain that they would find it impossible to obtain succour in the prairies, where there were none but Indians, hostile to the whites, whoever they might be, or trappers and hunters, who cared very little to intermeddle in affairs that did not at all concern them.

His resolution once taken, the captain put it in execution immediately.

He cast an anxious look around him; his situation was still the same; notwithstanding their almost superhuman efforts to climb the abrupt ascent which led to the intrenchments, the pirates had not gained a single step. The moment a man showed himself openly, a ball from a Mexican carbine sent him rolling down the precipice.

The captain gave the signal for retreat; that is to say, he imitated the cry of the prairie dogs.

The combat ceased instantly.

The spot, which an instant before was animated by the cries of combatants and the continued report of fire-arms, sank suddenly into the completest silence.

Only, as soon as the men had paused in their work of destruction, the condors, the vultures, and urubus commenced theirs.

Swarms came hovering over the dead bodies, upon which they fell uttering sharp cries, and made a horrible carnage of human flesh, in sight of the Mexicans, who did not dare to leave their intrenchments, and were forced to remain spectators of this hideous banquet of the wild creatures.

The pirates rallied in a ravine, out of reach of the fire, and counted their numbers.

Their losses were enormous; out of forty, nineteen only remained.

In less than an hour they had had twenty-one killed, more than half of their whole band.

The Mexicans, with the exception of Captain Aguilar, had neither killed nor wounded.

The loss of the pirates made them reflect seriously.

The greater number were of opinion it would be best to retire, and give up an expedition which presented so many dangers and so few hopes of success.

The captain was even more discouraged than his companions.

Certes, if it had only been to gain gold or diamonds, he would, without hesitation, have resigned his projects; but a feeling more strong than the desire of wealth influenced his actions, and excited him to carry the adventure through.

The treasure he coveted—a treasure of incalculable price—was Dona Luz, the girl whom he had, in Mexico, rescued from the hands of his own bandits, and for whom he entertained a violent passion.

From Mexico he had followed her step by step, watching, like a wild beast, for an opportunity of carrying off his prey, for the possession of which no sacrifice was too great, no difficulty insuperable.

Therefore did he bring into play upon his bandits all the resources that speech gives to a man influenced by passion, to keep them with him, to raise their courage, and to induce them to attempt one more attack before retiring.

He had much trouble in persuading them; as generally happens in such cases, the bravest had been killed, and the survivors did not feel themselves at all inclined to expose themselves to a similar fate. By dint, however, of persuasions and menaces, the captain succeeded in getting from the bandits the promise of remaining till the next day, and of attempting a decisive blow during the night.

This being agreed upon between the pirates and their chief, Waktehno ordered his men to conceal themselves as well as they could, but, above all, not to stir without his orders, whatever they might see the Mexicans do.

The captain hoped, by remaining invisible, to persuade the besieged that the pirates had resolved to retreat, and had, in fact, done so.

This plan was not at all unskilful, and, in fact, produced almost all the results which he expected.

The glowing fires of the setting sun gilded with their last rays the summits of the rocks and the trees; the evening breeze, which was rising, refreshed the air; the great luminary was about to disappear on the horizon, in a bed of purple vapours.

Silence was only disturbed by the deafening cries of the birds of prey, that continued their cannibal banquet, quarrelling with ferocious inveteracy over the fragments of flesh.

The general, with a heart deeply moved by this spectacle, when he reflected that Captain Aguilar, a man whose heroic devotion had saved them all, was exposed to this horrible profanation, resolved not to abandon his body, and, cost what it might, to go and bring it in, in order to give it sepulture—a last homage due to the brave young man.

Dona Luz, to whom he communicated his intention, although perfectly sensible of the danger, had not the heart to oppose it.

The general selected four resolute men, and scaling the intrenchments, advanced at their head towards the spot where the body of the captain lay.

The lanceros left in the camp kept a watchful eye on the plain, ready to protect their bold companions with energy, if they were interrupted in their pious task.

The pirates concealed in the clefts of the rocks did not lose one of their movements, but were most careful not to betray their presence.

The general was able, therefore, to accomplish unmolested the duty he had imposed upon himself.

He had no difficulty in finding the body. He lay half prostrate at the foot of a tree, holding a pistol in one hand and his machete in the other, his head elevated, his back fixed, and a smile upon his lips, as if even after death he still defied those who had killed him.

His body was literally covered with wounds ; but, by a strange chance, which the general remarked with joy, up to that moment the birds of prey had respected it.

The lanceros placed the body upon their crossed guns, and returned to the camp.

The general followed at a short distance from them, observing and watching every bush and thicket.

But nothing stirred ; the greatest tranquillity prevailed everywhere ; the pirates had disappeared, without leaving any other traces but their dead.

The general began to hope that his enemies were really gone, and he breathed a sigh, as if relieved.

Night came on with its habitual rapidity ; all eyes were fixed upon the lanceros, who bore back their dead officer, but no one remarked a score of phantoms who glided silently over the rocks, drawing, by degrees, nearer to the camp, close to which they concealed themselves, keeping their ferocious looks fixed upon its defenders.

The general caused the body to be placed upon a bed prepared in haste, and taking a spade, he insisted upon himself digging the grave in which the young man was to be deposited. All the lanceros ranged themselves around him, leaning on their arms.

The general took off his hat, and from a prayer-book read with a loud voice the Service of the Dead.

There was something grand and impressive in this simple ceremony, in the midst of the desert, whose thousand mysterious voices appeared likewise to modulate a prayer, in face of that sublime nature upon which the finger of God is traced so visibly.

Nothing occurred to disturb the accomplishment of this last duty.

After every person present had once again taken a melancholy farewell of the dead, he was lowered into the grave, enveloped in his cloak ; his arms were placed by his side, and the grave was filled up.

A slight elevation of the sod, which would soon disappear, alone marked the place where reposed for ever the body of a man whose heroism had saved by a sublime devotedness those who had confided in him.

The mourners separated, swearing to avenge the dead, or that falling, to do as he had done.

Darkness was now spread over all.

The general, after having made a last round, to satisfy himself that the sentinels were steady at their posts, wished his niece a good-night, and laid himself down across the entrance of her tent, on the outside.

Three hours passed away in perfect quiet.

All at once, like a legion of demons, a score of men silently scaled the intrenchments, and before the sentinels could attempt the least resistance, they were seized and slaughtered.

The camp of the Mexicans was invaded by the pirates, and in their train entered murder and pillage !

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE BATTLE.

THE pirates bounded into the camp like jackals, howling and brandishing their weapons.

As soon as the camp was invaded, the captain left his people to pillage and kill at

their pleasure. Without concerning himself any more about them, he rushed towards the tent.

But there his passage was barred. The general had rallied seven or eight men round him, and awaited the bandit firmly, resolved to die rather than allow one of those wretches to touch his niece.

At the sight of the old soldier, with his flashing eye, his pistol in one hand and his sword in the other, the captain paused.

But this pause did not last longer than a flash of lightning; he got together a half-score of pirates.

"Give way!" he said, brandishing his machete.

"Come on!" the general said.

Then followed a terrible and merciless struggle between men who, on both sides, knew they had no pity to expect.

Every one endeavoured to make his blows mortal, without taking the trouble to parry those dealt upon himself, satisfied with falling, provided that in his fall he could drag down his adversary.

The wounded endeavoured to rise, for the purpose of burying their poniards in the bodies of those who were fighting around them.

This fierce contest could not last long; all the lanceros were massacred; the general fell in his turn, struck down by the captain, who threw himself upon him and bound him tightly with his belt, in order to prevent the possibility of his resisting any further.

The general had only received slight wounds, which had scarcely penetrated to the flesh; for the captain, for reasons best known to himself, had carefully protected him during the combat, parrying with his machete the blows which the bandits tried to inflict.

He wished to take his enemy alive, and he had succeeded.

All the Mexicans had fallen, it is true, but the victory had cost the pirates dear; more than half of them were killed.

The general's negro, armed with an enormous club, which he had made of the trunk of a young tree, for a long time resisted all who attempted to take him, crushing without mercy all who imprudently came within reach of the weapon which he handled with such uncommon dexterity.

His enemies at length succeeded in lassoing him, and casting him half-strangled to the ground; the captain, however, came to his rescue at the moment when a pirate was raising his arm to put an end to him.

As soon as the captain found the general incapable of moving, he uttered a cry of joy, and without stopping to staunch the blood of two wounds he had received, he bounded like a tiger over the body of his enemy, who was writhing powerless at his feet, and penetrated into the tent.

It was empty. Dona Luz had disappeared.

The captain was thunderstruck!

What could have become of the girl?

The tent was small, almost void of furniture, it was impossible she could be concealed in it.

A disordered bed proved that at the moment of the surprise, Dona Luz had been sleeping peaceably.

She had vanished like a sylph, without leaving any trace of her flight.

A fight perfectly incomprehensible to the pirate, as the camp had been invaded on all sides at once.

How was it possible for a young girl, awakened suddenly, to have had courage and presence of mind enough to fly so quickly, and pass unperceived amidst conquerors whose first care had been to guard all the issues?

The captain sought in vain the solution of this enigma. He stamped with anger, and plunged his poniard into the packages that might serve as temporary places of refuge for the fugitive; but all without success.

Convinced at length that all his researches in the tent were in vain, he rushed out, prowling about like a wild beast, persuaded that if by a miracle she had succeeded in escaping, alone in the night, half dressed, wandering in the desert, he should easily find her again.

In the meantime, the pillage went on with a celerity and an order in its disorder, which did honour to the practical knowledge of the pirates.

The conquerors, fatigued with killing and robbing, plunged their poniards into the skins filled with mezzal, and an orgie soon succeeded theft and murder.

All at once a loud and fierce cry resounded at a little distance, and a shower of bullets came pattering full upon the bandits.

Surprised in their turn, they flew to their arms, and endeavoured to rally.

At the same instant, a mass of Indians appeared, bounding like jaguars among the packages, closely followed by a troop of hunters, at the head of whom were Loyal Heart, Belhumeur, and Black Elk.

The position became critical for the pirates.

The captain, recalled to himself by the peril his people ran, left with regret the fruitless search he was engaged in, and grouping his men around him, he carried off the only two prisoners he had made, that is to say, the general and his black servant, and taking skilful advantage of the tumult inseparable from an eruption like that of the allies, he ordered his men to disperse in all directions, in order to escape more easily the blows of their adversaries.

After one sharp fire, which caused a slight pause among the Indians, the pirates flew away like a cloud of unclean birds of prey, and disappeared in the darkness. But, whilst flying, the captain, left last to support the retreat, did not cease, as he glided along the rocks, still to seek, as much as was possible in the precipitation of his flight, for traces of the young girl; but he could discover nothing.

The disappointed captain retired with rage in his heart, revolving in his head the most sinister projects.

Loyal Heart, warned by the Indian scout, and more particularly by the recital of the doctor, of the proposed attack on the camp, had marched immediately, in order to bring succour to the Mexicans as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, in spite of the celerity of their march, the trappers and the Comanches arrived too late to save the caravan.

When the leaders of the expedition became assured of the flight of the pirates, Eagle Head and his warriors set off on their track.

Left master of the camp, Loyal Heart ordered a general battue in the neighbouring thickets and high grass, which the bandits had not had time to explore in detail, for they had scarcely obtained possession of the camp before they were driven out of it again.

This battue brought to light Phoebe, the young servant of Dona Luz, and two lancers, who had taken refuge in the trunk of a tree, and who arrived more dead than alive, conducted by Black Elk and some hunters, who tried in vain to re-assure them, and revive their courage.

The poor devils still believed themselves in the hands of the pirates, and Loyal Heart had great difficulty in persuading them that the people they saw were friends who had come too late to succour them.

As soon as they were sufficiently restored to speak collectedly, Loyal Heart went with them into the tent, and required of them a succinct account of all that had taken place.

The young quadroon, when she saw with whom she had to do, all at once regained

her wanted assurance; and besides, having recognized Loyal Heart, she did not require much coaxing to set her tongue going, and in a few minutes made the hunter acquainted with all the terrible events of which she had been spectatress.

"So," he asked, "Captain Aguilar was killed, was he?"

"Alas! yes!" the young girl replied, with a sigh of regret for the poor young officer.

"And the general?" said the hunter,

"Oh! as to the general," said the girl briskly, "he defended himself like a lion, and only fell after an heroic resistance."

"Is he dead, then?" Loyal Heart asked, with great emotion.

"Oh! no!" she said almost cheerfully, "he is only wounded. I saw the bandits pass as they carried him away."

"I am glad to hear it!" said the hunter; "but your young mistress, what has become of her?"

"My mistress, Dona Luz?"

"Yes, Dona Luz; I would give much to know where she is, and to be certain she is in safety."

"She is so, since she is near you," said a harmonious voice.

And Dona Luz appeared, still pale from the poignant emotions she had undergone, but calm; she had a smile on her lips, and her eyes sparkled brilliantly.

No one present could repress a movement of extreme surprise at the apparition of the young lady.

"Oh! God be praised!" the hunter cried; "our succour has not, then, been completely useless."

"No," replied she, kindly; but she shortly added with sadness, whilst a shade of melancholy clouded her features, "now that I have lost him who was to me as a father, I come to ask your protection, Caballero."

"It is yours, madam," he replied with warmth. "And as to your uncle, oh! depend upon me; I will restore him to you, if the enterprise costs me my life. You know," he added, "that before to-day I have proved my devotion to you and him."

The first emotion over, it became a question how the young girl had succeeded in escaping the pirates.

Dona Luz gave as simple an account as possible of what had passed.

The young lady had thrown herself, with all her clothes on, upon the bed; but anxiety kept her awake, a secret presentiment warned her to be upon her guard.

At the cry uttered by the pirates, she started from her bed in terror and amazement, and at once perceived that flight was impossible.

Whilst casting a terrified look around her, she perceived some clothes thrown in a disorderly manner into a hammock, and hanging over the sides of it.

An idea, which appeared to come to her from Heaven, shot across her brain like a luminous flash.

She glided under these clothes, and curling herself up into as little space as possible, she crouched at the bottom of the hammock, without altering the disordered state of the things.

God had ordained it that the bandit, while searching, never dreamt of plunging his hand into what seemed an empty hammock.

Saved by this chance, she remained thus huddled up for full an hour, a prey to fears of the most appalling nature,

The arrival of the hunters, together with the voice of Loyal Heart, which she soon recognised, restored her to hope; she left the place of her concealment, and had impatiently waited for a favourable moment to present herself.

The hunters were wonderstruck at a recital at once so simple and so affecting; they

cordially congratulated the young lady upon her courage and presence of mind, which alone had saved her.

When a little order was re-established in the camp, Loyal Heart waited upon Dona Luz.

"Senora," he said, "it will not be long before day appears; when you have taken a few hours' repose, I will conduct you to my mother, who is a pious, good woman; when she knows you, I feel certain she will love you as a daughter. And then, as soon as you are in safety, I will set earnestly about restoring your uncle to you."

Without waiting for the thanks of the young lady, he bowed respectfully, and left the tent.

When he had disappeared, Dona Luz sighed, and sank pensively down upon a seat.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE CAVERN OF VERDIGRIS.

TEN days had passed away since the events related in our last chapter.

We will conduct the reader, between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, into the grotto discovered by Belhumeur, which Loyal Heart had made his chosen habitation.

The interior of the cavern, lighted by numerous torches of that wood which the Indians call candle-wood, which burned, fixed at distances on the projections of the rock, presented the aspect of a halt of gipsies, or of an encampment of bandits.

Forty trappers and Comanche warriors were dispersed about here and there; some were sleeping, others smoking, others cleaning their arms or repairing their clothes; a few, crouching before two or three fires, over which were suspended cauldrons, and where enormous joints of venison were roasting, were preparing the repast.

At each place of issue two sentinels, motionless, but with eyes and ears on the watch, silently provided for the common safety.

In a compartment separated from the larger one by a block of projecting rock, two women and a man, upon seats rudely cut with the hatchet, were conversing in a low voice.

The two women were Dona Luz and the mother of Loyal Heart; the man who looked at them, while smoking his husk cigarette, and mingled occasionally in the conversation by an interjection drawn from him by surprise, admiration, or joy, was Eusebio, the old Spanish servant.

At the entrance of this compartment, which formed a kind of separate chamber in the cavern, another man was walking backwards and forwards, with his hands behind his back, whistling between his teeth an air which he probably composed as his thoughts dictated.

This man was Black Elk.

Loyal Heart, Eagle Head, and Belhumeur were absent.

The conversation of the two women appeared to interest them greatly. The mother of the hunter often exchanged looks with her old servant, who had allowed his cigarette to go out, but who kept on smoking it mechanically.

"Oh!" said the old lady, clasping her hands with fervour, and raising her eyes towards heaven, "the finger of the Almighty is in all this!"

"Yes," Eusebio replied, with profound conviction, "it is He who has done it!"

"Tell me, my darling; during the two months of your journey, did your uncle the general never give you a glimpse, by his words, his actions, or his proceedings, of the object of this expedition?"

"Never!" Dona Luz replied.

"That is strange!" the old lady murmured.

"Strange, indeed," Eusebio repeated, who still persisted in endeavouring to draw smoke from his extinguished cigarette.

"But tell me," the mother of Loyal Heart resumed, "when you arrived in the prairies, how did your uncle employ his time? Pardon me, my child, these questions, which must surprise you, but which are not at all dictated by curiosity; hereafter you will understand me, and you will then acknowledge that the interest I take in you alone leads me to interrogate you."

"I do not at all doubt it, senora," Dona Luz replied, with a charming smile; "therefore I have no difficulty in replying to you. My uncle, after our arrival in the prairies, became dull and preoccupied; he sought for the society of men accustomed to the life of the desert, and when he met with one, he would converse with him and interrogate him for hours together."

"And about what did he interrogate him, my child? Do you recollect?"

"Good heavens! senora, I must confess to my shame," the young girl replied blushing slightly, "that I did not give great attention to this conversation, which I thought at least could interest me but little."

"That is true, dear child; pardon me these questions, which fatigue you, and whose object you cannot perceive," said the good lady, "if you wish it, we will speak of something else."

"As you please, senora," the young girl answered, returning her kiss. "I am most happy to talk with you, and whatever subject you choose, I am sure I shall always take great interest in it."

"But we are talking idly, and forgetting my poor son, who has been absent since morning, and ought to have returned by this time."

"Oh! I hope nothing can have happened to him," cried Dona Luz.

"You take great interest in him, then?" the old lady remarked with a smile.

"Ah! senora," she replied, with emotion, whilst a vivid blush rose to her cheeks, "can I do otherwise, after the services he has rendered us?"

"My son has promised to deliver your uncle; be assured that he will fulfil his promise."

"Oh! I do not at all doubt it, senora. What a noble, grand character!" she cried with warmth; "how justly he is named Loyal Heart!"

The old lady and Eusebio looked at her and smiled; they were delighted with the enthusiasm of the girl.

Dona Luz perceived the attention with which they were looking at her. She stopped short in confusion, hung down her head, and blushed more than ever.

"Oh!" said the old lady, taking her hand, "you may go on, my child; I am pleased to hear you speak thus of my son. Yes," she added, in a melancholy tone, and as if talking to herself, "yes; he is a grand and noble character. Like all exalted natures, he is misunderstood; but patience! God is trying him, and the day will come when justice will be rendered him in the face of all men."

"Can he, then, be unhappy?" the young girl ventured to ask, timidly.

"I do not say he is, my child," the good mother answered, with a stifled sigh. "In this world who can flatter himself with being happy? Every one has his troubles, which he must bear."

A movement was heard in the grotto; several men entered.

"Here is your son, senora," said Black Elk.

"Thank you, my friend," she replied.

"Oh! I am so glad!" said Dona Luz, springing up joyfully.

But ashamed of this inconsiderate movement, the girl sank back, confused and blushing, into her seat again.

It was, in fact, Loyal Heart, but he was not alone. Belhumeur and Eagle Heart accompanied him, as did several other trappers.

As soon as he was in the grotto, the young man directed his steps hastily towards his mother's retreat; he kissed her, and then turning towards Dona Luz, he bowed to her with a degree of embarrassment that was not natural to him, and which the old lady could not but remark.

The young lady returned him a salutation not less confused than his own.

"Well," he said, with a cheerful smile, "you must have been very tired of waiting for me, my noble prisoners. Time must travel slowly in this horrible grotto. Pardon me for having confined you to such a hideous dwelling, Dona Luz—you are made to inhabit splendid palaces. Alas! this is the most magnificent of my habitations."

"With the mother of him who has saved my life, senor," the girl replied, nobly, "I think myself lodged like a queen, whatever be the place I inhabit."

"You are a thousand times too good, senora," the hunter stammered; "you really make me confused."

"Well, my son," the old lady interrupted, "what have you done to-day? Have you any good news to give us? Dona Luz is very uneasy about her uncle; she longs to see him again."

"I can quite understand the senora's anxiety," the hunter replied, "which I hope soon to be able to put an end to. We have not done much to-day; we have found it impossible to get upon the track of the bandits. It is enough to drive a man wild with vexation. Fortunately, as we returned, at a few paces from the grotto, we met with the doctor, who, according to his praiseworthy custom, was seeking herbs in the clefts of the rocks, and he told us that he has seen a man of suspicious appearance prowling about the neighbourhood. We immediately went upon the hunt, and were not long in discovering an individual whom we took prisoner, and have brought hither with us."

"You see, senor," said Dona Luz, with a playful air, "that it is sometimes of use to be seeking simples. Our dear doctor has, according to all appearance, rendered you a great service."

"Without his will being concerned in the matter," said Loyal Heart, laughing.

"I do not say the contrary," the young girl rejoined, banteringly, "but it exists none the less; it is to the herbs you owe it."

"Seeking for herbs may have a good purpose, I agree; but everything in its proper time; without unjustly reproaching him, the doctor has not always known when to choose it."

Notwithstanding the seriousness of the facts to which these words referred, the hearers could not repress a smile at the expense of the unlucky savant.

"Come! come!" said Dona Luz, "I will not have my poor doctor attacked."

"You are right, senora, and I will say no more about it. Now I must beg your permission to leave you; my companions are literally dying of hunger, and the brave fellows wait for me to take their repast."

"But," Eusebio asked, "the man you have taken—what do you mean to do with him?"

"I do not know yet; as soon as our meal is over, I mean to interrogate him."

The cauldrons were taken off the fire, the quarters of venison were cut into slices, and the trappers and Indians sat down fraternally near each other, and ate their repast with a good appetite.

The ladies were served apart in their retreat by Nô Eusebio.

The man who had been arrested near the grotto had been placed under the guard

of two stout trappers, armed to the teeth, who never took their eyes off him; but he seemed to entertain no wish to escape; on the contrary, he did honour vigorously to the food that was placed before him.

As soon as the meal was over, the chiefs drew together, and conversed for a few minutes among themselves in a low voice. Then, upon the order of Loyal Heart, the prisoner was brought forward.

This man, at whom they had scarcely looked, was recognised the moment he was face to face with the chiefs, who could not repress an expression of surprise.

"Captain Waktehno!" said Loyal Heart, in perfect astonishment.

"Himself, gentlemen!" the pirate replied, with haughty irony; "what have you to ask of him?"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DIPLOMACY.

It was an unheard-of piece of audacity in the captain, after what had taken place, to come thus and deliver himself up, without the slightest resistance, into the hands of men who would not hesitate to inflict upon him a severe vengeance.

The hunters were consequently astonished at the proceeding of the pirate, and began to suspect a snare; their surprise increased in proportion as they reflected upon his apparent madness.

They perfectly understood that if they had taken him, it was because he was willing that it should be so; that he had probably some powerful motive for acting thus, particularly after all the pains he had taken to conceal his track from all eyes, and find a retreat so impenetrable that the Indians themselves had given up searching for him.

What did he want amidst his most implacable enemies? What reason sufficiently strong had been able to induce him to deliver himself up?

This is what the trappers asked each other, whilst looking at him with that curiosity and that interest which, in spite of ourselves, we are forced to accord to the intrepid man who accomplishes a bold action, whatever otherwise may be his moral character.

"Sir," said Loyal Heart, after the pause, "as you have thought proper to place yourself in our hands, you certainly will not refuse to reply to the questions we may think proper to put to you?"

A smile of an undefinable expression passed over the thin, pale lips of the pirate.

"Not only," he replied, in a calm, clear voice, "will I not refuse to reply to you, gentlemen, but still further, if you will permit, I will forestall your questions by telling you myself spontaneously all that has passed, which will enlighten you, I am sure, with regard to the facts which have appeared obscure, and which you have in vain endeavoured to make out."

A murmur of stupefaction pervaded the ranks of the trappers, who had drawn near by degrees, and listened attentively.

The scene assumed strange proportions, and promised to become extremely interesting.

Loyal Heart reflected for a moment, and then addressed the pirate.

"Do so, sir," he said; "we listen to you."

The captain bowed, and, with a jeering tone, commenced his recital; when he arrived at the taking of the camp, he continued thus—

"It was cleverly played, was it not, gentlemen? Certes, I can look for nothing but compliments from you who are past masters in such matters; but there is one thing of which you are ignorant, and which I will tell you. The capture of the Mexican general's wealth was but of secondary importance to me, I had another aim, and that aim I will make you acquainted with—I wished to obtain possession of Dona Luz. From Mexico I followed the caravan, step by step; I had corrupted the principal guide, the Babbler, an old friend of mine; abandoning to my companions the gold and jewels, I desired nothing but the young girl."

"Well, but it seems you missed your aim," Belhumeur interrupted him, with a sardonic smile.

"Do you think so?" the other replied, with imperturbable assurance. "Well, you appear to be in the right; I have, for this time, missed my aim, but all is not yet said, and I may not always fail."

"You speak here, amidst a hundred and fifty of the best rifles of the prairies about this odious project, with as much confidence as if you were in safety, surrounded by your own bandits, and concealed in the depths of one of your most secret dens, captain. This is either an act of great imprudence, or a still more rare piece of insolence," Loyal Heart said, sternly.

"Bah! the peril is not so great for me as you would make me believe; you know I am not a man easily intimidated, therefore a truce to threats, if you please, and let us reason like serious men."

"We hunters, trappers, and Indian warriors, assembled in this grotto, have the right, acting in the name of our common safety, to apply to you the laws of the frontiers, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, as attainted and convicted, even by your own confession, of robbery, murder, and an attempt at abduction. This law we mean to apply to you immediately. What have you to say in your defence?"

"Everything in its turn, Loyal Heart; we will talk about that presently; but, in the first place, let us terminate, if you please, what I had to say to you. Be satisfied, it is but the delay of a few minutes; I will myself revert to that question which you seem to have so much at heart, as you instal yourself, by your own private authority, judge in the desert."

"That law is as ancient as the world, it emanates from God himself; it is the duty of all honest people to run down a wild beast when they meet with one."

"The comparison is not flattering," the pirate replied, "but I am not susceptible; I do not easily take offence. Will you allow me to speak?"

"Speak, then, and let us have an end of this."

"That is exactly what I ask; listen to me, then. In this world, everyone comprehends life after his own fashion, some widely, others in a narrow way; for me, my dream is to retire, a few years hence, to the depths of one of our beautiful Mexican provinces with a moderate competency—you see I am not ambitious. A few months back, at the termination of several lucrative affairs which I had happily effected in the prairies by means of courage and address, I found myself master of a pretty round sum, which, according to my custom, I resolved to invest, in order to procure me hereafter the moderate competency of which I was speaking to you. I went to Mexico to place my money in the hands of an honourable French banker established in that city, who answered all my expectations, and whom I recommend to you, if you have occasion for such a person."

"What is all this verbiage to us?" Loyal Heart interrupted, hotly. "You are laughing at us, captain."

"Not the least in the world. I will go on. In Mexico, chance afforded me an opportunity of rendering Dona Luz a rather important service."

"You?" said Loyal Heart, angrily.

"Why not?" the other replied. "The affair is very simple. I delivered her from

the hands of four bandits who were plundering her. I saw her, and became madly in love with her."

"Man! man!" said the hunter, colouring with vexation; "this exceeds all bounds. Dona Luz is a lady who ought never to be spoken of without respect. I will not allow her to be insulted in my presence."

"We are exactly of the same opinion," the other continued, jeeringly; "but it is none the less true that I fell in love with her. I skilfully obtained information concerning her; I learnt who she was, the journey she was about to take. Then my plan was laid, which, as you just now said, has completely failed; but which, nevertheless, I have not yet given up."

"We will endeavour to settle that once for all."

"And you will do well, if you can."

"Now, I suppose, you have finished?"

"Not yet, if you please; but at this point what remains for me to say renders the presence of Dona Luz indispensable. Upon her alone depends the success of my mission to you."

"I do not understand you."

"It would be useless for you to understand me at this moment; but rest satisfied, Loyal Heart, you shall soon have the key to the enigma."

During the whole of this long discussion, the pirate had not for a moment lost that self-possession, that sneering smile, that bantering tone, and that freedom of manner, that confounded the hunters.

He bore much more the resemblance to a gentleman on a visit at the house of a country neighbour, than to a prisoner on the point of being shot. He did not appear to care the least in the world about the danger he was running. As soon as he had finished speaking, whilst the trappers were consulting in a low voice, he employed himself in rolling a husk cigarette, which he lit and smoked quietly.

"Dona Luz," Loyal Heart resumed, with ill-disguised impatience, "has nothing to do with these debates; her presence is not necessary."

"You are entirely mistaken, my dear sir," the pirate coolly replied, puffing out a volume of smoke; "she is indispensable, and for this reason: You understand perfectly, do you not, that I am too cunning a fox to give myself up thus voluntarily into your hands, if I had not behind me someone whose life would answer for mine. That someone is the uncle of the young lady. If I am not at midnight in my den, as you do me the honour to call it, with my brave companions, at precisely ten minutes after midnight the honourable gentleman will be shot without fail or pity."

A shudder of anger ran along the ranks of the hunters.

"I know very well," the pirate continued, "that you, personally, care very little for the life of the general, and would generously sacrifice it in exchange for mine; but fortunately for me, Dona Luz, I am convinced, is not of your opinion, and attaches great value to the existence of her uncle; be good enough, therefore, to beg her to come here, in order that she may hear the proposal I have to make her. Time presses, the way to my encampment is long; if I arrive too late, you alone will be responsible for the misfortunes that may be caused by my involuntary delay."

"I am here, sir," said Dona Luz, coming forward. Concealed amidst the crowd of hunters, she had heard all that had been said.

The pirate threw away his half-consumed cigarette, bowed courteously to the young lady, and saluted her with respect.

"I am proud of the honour, senora, that you deign to do to me."

"A truce to ironical compliments, if you please. I am listening to you; what have you to say to me?"

"You judge me wrongly, senora," the pirate replied; "but I hope to reinstate

myself in your good opinion hereafter. Do you not recognise me? I thought I had left a better remembrance in your mind."

"It is possible, sir, that during a certain time I retained a favourable remembrance of you," the young lady answered; "but, after what has taken place, I can only see in you a robber and a murderer!"

"The terms are harsh, senora."

"Pardon them, if they wound you, sir; but I have not yet recovered from the terrors you have caused me—terrors which your proceedings of to-day augment instead of diminishing. Be pleased, then, without further delay, to let me know your intentions."

"I am in despair at being thus ill-understood by you. Attribute, I implore you, all that has happened solely to the violence of my passion."

"Sir! you insult me," the young lady interrupted, drawing herself up haughtily: "what can there be in common between me and the leader of the bandits?"

At this cutting reproof a flush passed over the face of the pirate: he bit his moustache with anger; but, making a strong effort, he kept down in the depths of his heart the feelings which agitated him, and replied in a calm, respectful tone—

"So be it, senora; crush me—I have deserved it."

"Is it for the purpose of uttering these common-places that you have required my presence here, sir? In that case you will please to allow me to retire; a lady of my rank is not accustomed to such manners, nor to listen to such language."

She made a movement as if to rejoin the mother of Loyal Heart, who, on her side, advanced towards her.

"One instant, senora," the pirate cried, savagely; "since you despise my prayers, listen to my orders!"

"Your orders!" the hunter shouted, springing close to his side. "Have you forgotten where you are, miserable scoundrel?"

"Come, come! a truce to threats and abuse, my masters!" the pirate replied, in a commanding voice. "You know very well you dare do nothing against me—that not a single hair of my head will fall."

"This is too much!" the hunter ejaculated.

"Stop! Loyal Heart," said Dona Luz, placing herself before him; "this man is unworthy of your anger. I prefer seeing him thus; he is best in his part of a bandit—he at least plays that without a mask."

"Yes! I have thrown off the mask," the pirate shouted: "and now, listen to me. In three days I will return—you see. I give you time to reflect. If you do not then consent to follow me, your uncle shall be given up to the most atrocious tortures; and, as a last remembrance of me, I will send you his head."

"Monster!" the poor girl exclaimed, in an accent of despair.

"Ah! you see," said he, shrugging his shoulders, and with the grin of a demon, "every one makes love after his own fashion. I have sworn that you shall be my wife!"

But Dona Luz could hear no more. Overcome by grief as well as other feelings, she sank senseless into the arms of the mother of the hunter, who with Nô Eusebio, bore her out of the larger apartment.

"Enough!" said Loyal Heart, with a stern accent, as he laid his hand upon his shoulder; "be thankful to God, who allows you to go safe and sound from our hands."

"In three days, at the same hour, you will see me again, my masters," he said, disdainfully.

"Between this and then luck may turn," said Belhumeur.

The pirate made no reply, but by a grin and a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders; and left the cavern with a step as firm and free as if nothing extraordinary had happened, without even deigning to turn round.

He had scarcely disappeared, when, from the other outlets of the grotto, Belhumeur, Black Elk, and Eagle Head rushed upon his track.

Loyal Heart remained thoughtful for an instant, and then went, with a pale face and a pensive brow, to inquire after Dona Luz.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

LOVE.

DONA LUZ and Loyal Heart were placed, with regard to each other, in a singular position. Both young, both handsome, they loved without daring to confess it to themselves, almost without suspecting it.

Both, although their lives had been spent in conditions diametrically opposite, possessed equal freshness of feeling, equal ingenuousness of heart.

The childhood of the maiden had passed away, pale and colourless, amidst the extravagant religious practices of a country where the religion of Christ is rather a paganism than a pure, noble, and simple faith.

She had never felt a beating of the heart. She was as ignorant of love as she was of sorrow.

She lived like the birds of heaven, forgetting the days gone by, careless of the morrow.

The journey she had undertaken had completely changed the colour of her existence.

The appearance of Loyal Heart, under the extraordinary circumstances in which he had presented himself to her, had won upon her mind, which was at that time particularly open to all sensations.

In presence of the exalted nature of the hunter, of that man in wild costume, but possessing a manly countenance, handsome features and noble bearing, she had felt agitated without comprehending the reason.

The fact was, by the force of the sympathies which exist between all the beings of the human family, her heart had met the heart she sought for.

Delicate and frail, she stood in need of this energetic man, with the fascinating glance, the leonine courage, and an iron will, to support her through life, and defend her with his omnipotent protection.

Thus had she, therefore, from the first moment, yielded with a feeling of undefinable happiness, to the inclination which drew her towards Loyal Heart; and love had installed himself as master in her heart, before she was aware of it, or had even thought of resisting.

Recent events had awakened with intense force the passion which had been slumbering. Now that she was near him, that she heard, at every instant, his praises from the mouth of his mother, or from those of his companions, she had come to consider her love as forming part of her existence, she could not comprehend how she could have lived so long without loving this man, whom it appeared she must have known from her very birth.

She no longer lived but for him and by him; happy at a look or a smile, joyful when she saw him, sad when he remained long absent from her.

Loyal Heart had arrived at the same result.

Knowing no other woman but his mother, for the Indians, by their manners, inspired him with nothing but disgust, he had reached the age of six-and-thirty

without thinking of love, without knowing what it was, and, what is more, without ever having heard pronounced that word which contains so many things in its tour letters, and which, in this world, is the source of so many sublime devotions and so many horrible crimes.

After a long day's hunting through woods and ravines, or after having been engaged fifteen or sixteen hours in trapping beavers, when, in the evening, they met in the prairie at their bivouac fire, the conversation of Loyal Heart and his friend Belhumeur, who was as ignorant as himself in this respect, could not possibly turn on anything but the events of the day.

Weeks, months, years passed away without bringing any change in his existence, except a vague uneasiness, whose cause was unknown, but which weighed upon his mind, and for which he could not account. Nature has her imprescriptible rights, and every man must submit to them, in whatever condition he may chance to be placed.

Thus, therefore, when accident brought Dona Luz before him, by the same sentiment of instinctive and irresistible sympathy which acted upon the young girl, his art flew towards her.

The hunter, astonished at the sudden interest he felt for a stranger, whom, according to all appearances, he might never see again, was almost angry with her on account of that sentiment which was awakening within him, and gave to his intercourse with her an asperity which was unnatural to him.

Like all lofty minds who have been accustomed to see everything bend before them, he felt himself irritated at being subdued by a girl, at yielding to an influence from which he no longer could extricate himself.

But when, after the fire in the prairie, he quitted the Mexican camp, notwithstanding the precipitation of his departure, he bore with him a remembrance of the fair stranger which increased with absence.

He always fancied he heard the soft and melodious notes of the young girl's voice sounding in his ears, however strong the efforts he made to forget her; in hours of watching or of sleep, she was always there, smiling, and fixing her enchanting looks upon him.

The struggle was severe. Loyal Heart, notwithstanding the passion that devoured him, knew what an insuperable distance separated him from Dona Luz, and how senseless and unrealisable this love was.

He therefore shunned, with an obstinacy that ought to have offended the maiden, all opportunities of meeting her. When by chance they happened to be together, he became taciturn and sullen, only answering with difficulty the questions she put to him, and, with that awkwardness peculiar to unpractised lovers, seizing the first opportunity for leaving her.

The young lady looked after him sadly, sighed quietly, and sometimes a liquid pearl flowed down her rosy cheeks at seeing this departure, which she took for indifference, and which was in reality love.

But during the few days that had passed since the taking of the camp the young people had progressed without suspecting it, and this was greatly assisted by the mother of Loyal Heart, who, with that second sight with which all mothers worthy of the name are endowed, had divined this passion, and the honourable struggle of her son, and had constituted herself the secret confidante of their love, assisting it unknown to them, and protecting it with all her power, whilst both lovers were persuaded that their secret was buried in the depths of their own hearts.

Such was the state of things two days after the proposal made by the captain to Dona Luz.

"What is the matter, my son? Why are your features clouded with such sadness?"

Loyal Heart raised his head, like a man suddenly awakened from sleep.

His mother and Dona Luz were standing before him, their arms interlaced, and leaning upon each other.

He cast upon them a melancholy glance, and replied, with a stifled sigh—

“Alas! mother, to-morrow is the last day. I have as yet been able to imagine nothing that can save Dona Luz, and restore her uncle to her.”

The two women started.

“To-morrow!” Dona Luz murmured; “that is true; it is to-morrow that that man is to come!”

“What will you do, my son?”

“How can I tell mother?” he replied, impatiently. “Oh! this man is stronger than I am. He has defeated all my plans. Up to the present moment we have not possibly been able to discover his retreat.”

“Loyal Heart,” the young lady said, softly, “will you then abandon me to the mercy of this bandit? Why, then, did you save me?”

“Oh!” the young man cried; “that word kills me.”

“I am not reproaching you, Loyal Heart,” she said; “but I am so unhappy. If I remain, I cause the death of my only relative. If I depart, I am dishonoured!”

“Oh, to be able to do nothing!” he cried, with great excitement. “To see you weep, to know that you are unhappy, and to be able to do nothing! “Oh!” he added, “to spare you the least anxiety I would sacrifice my life with joy.”

“Hope, my son, hope!” the old lady said, with an encouraging accent. “God is good. He will not abandon you.”

“Hope! how can you tell me to do so, mother? During the last two days my friends and I have attempted things that would appear impossible—and yet without result. Hope! and in a few hours this miserable wretch will come to claim the prey he covets!”

Dona Luz cast upon him a peculiar glance; a melancholy smile moved over her lips, and then she gently laid her delicate little hand upon his shoulder—

“Loyal Heart,” she said, with her melodious, clear voice, “do you love me?”

“Why that question?” he answered, in a deeply agitated tone.

“Answer me,” she replied, “without hesitation, as I put the question to you; the hour is a solemn one; I have a favour to ask of you.”

“Oh! name it, senora; you know I can refuse you nothing!”

“Answer me, then,” she said, trembling with emotion; “do you love me?”

“If it be love to desire to sacrifice my life for you—if it be love to suffer martyrdom at witnessing the flowing of a tear which I would give my whole blood to save you—if it be love to have the courage to see you accomplish the sacrifice that will be required from you to-morrow in order to save your uncle—oh! yes, senora, I love you with all my soul! Speak without fear; whatever you ask of me I will perform with joy.”

“That is well, my dear friend,” she said; “I depend upon your word; to-morrow I will remind you of it when that man presents himself; but, in the first place, my uncle must be saved, if it were to cost me my life. Alas! he has been a father to me; he loves me as his daughter. It was on my account that he fell into the hands of the bandits. Oh! swear to me, Loyal Heart, that you will deliver him,” she added.

Loyal Heart was about to reply, when Belhumeur and Black Elk entered the grotto.

“At last!” he cried, springing towards them.

The three men talked for a few minutes together in a low voice; then the hunter returned hastily towards the two women.

His face was glowing with animation.

"You were right, my dear mother," he exclaimed, in a cheerful tone, "God is good: He will not abandon those who place their confidence in Him. Now it is my turn to say hope, Dona Luz, I will soon restore your uncle to you."

"Oh!" she cried, joyfully, "can it be possible?"

"Hope! I repeat! Adieu, mother! Implore God to second me; I am about, more than ever, to stand in need of His help!"

Without saying more the young man rushed out of the grotto followed by his companions.

"What did he mean?" Dona Luz asked.

"Come with me, my daughter," the old lady replied, sorrowfully; "come, let us pray for him."

She drew her softly towards the retired part of the grotto which they inhabited.

There only remained about half a score men charged with the defence of the two women.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE PRISONERS.

WHEN the red-skins and hunters had recaptured the camp of the Mexicans, the pirates had spread in all directions, the more easily to escape their enemies.

The captain and the four men who carried off the general and his negro had descended the rocks, at the risk of being dashed to pieces.

On arriving at a certain distance, they stopped for breath.

A profound darkness enveloped them; over their heads they perceived the torches borne by the hunters who pursued them, but who took care not to venture in the dangerous path they had followed.

"This is lucky," said the captain; "now, my boys, let us rest for a few minutes, and go, two of you, and reconnoitre."

His orders were executed; a few minutes later the two bandits returned, announcing that they had discovered an excavation, which might temporarily offer them shelter and safety.

Starting off, they soon arrived at a hollow nook which appeared tolerably spacious, and which was situated a few fathoms lower down than the place they had stopped at.

When they were concealed in this hiding-place, the captain closed the entrance.

"There," said the captain, "now we are snug;" and drawing a steel from his pocket, he lit a torch of candle-wood.

As soon as they could distinguish objects, the bandits uttered a cry of joy. What in the darkness they had taken for a simple excavation proved to be a natural grotto.

"Eh! eh!" said the captain, "let us see what sort of quarters we have got into; remain here: I will go and reconnoitre our new domain."

After lighting a second torch, he explored the grotto.

It dipped deep under the mountain by a gentle descent; the walls were everywhere lofty, and sometimes they were widened into large compartments.

The cavern must have received external air by imperceptible fissures, for the light burned freely and the captain breathed without difficulty.

The farther the pirate advanced, the more perceptible the air became, which led him to conclude he was approaching an entrance of some kind.

He had been walking nearly twenty minutes, when a puff of wind came sharply in his face and made the flame of his torch flicker.

"Hum!" he muttered, "here is a place of exit—let us be prudent and put out our lights; we know not whom we may meet with outside."

As soon as the dazzling effect of the blaze of the torch was got rid of, he perceived, at a considerable distance before him, a feeble light.

He walked resolutely forward, and at the end of a few minutes came to the so much desired outlet.

The outlet of the grotto opened upon the banks of a little river, the water of which came murmuring close to the mouth of the cavern, so that the bandits might, by swimming or constructing a raft, go in and out without leaving any traces, and thus defeat all researches.

The captain perceived that this river flowed at some distance from the camp of the Mexicans. He breathed a sigh of satisfaction when he had well examined the environs, lit his torch again, and retraced his steps.

His companions, with the exception of one who watched the prisoners, were fast asleep.

The captain aroused them, and made them, in the first place, securely close up the hole by which they had entered, then he ordered them to follow him with the prisoners.

They stopped in one of the numerous halls; one man was appointed to guard the prisoners, who were left in this place, and the captain, with the three other bandits, continued their way to the outlet.

"You see," he said to them, "that sometimes misfortune has its good, since chance has allowed us to discover a place of refuge where no one will come to seek us. You, Frank, set off directly for the rendezvous I have appointed with your comrades, and bring them hither, as well as all the rest of our men. As for you, Antonio, you must procure us some provisions. Go, both of you."

The two bandits plunged into the river without reply, and disappeared.

At sun-rise the rest of the troop arrived. There were still thirty of them!

After an abundant breakfast, the captain at length turned his attention to his prisoners.

He repaired to the hall which served for their dungeon.

Since he had fallen into the hands of the bandits, the general had remained silent; the wounds he had received, being neglected, had festered, and gave him terrible pain; but he did not utter a complaint.

The only thing that brought a slight consolation to his pains was the certainty that his niece had escaped.

But what was to become of her in this desert, where nothing was to be met with but wild beasts, and still more ferocious Indians?

This idea redoubled his sufferings.

The captain was terrified at the state in which he found him.

"Come, general," he said, "courage! What the devil! luck often changes; I know something of that! *Caria!* never despair; nobody can tell what to-morrow will bring about. Give me your parole not to endeavour to escape, and I will immediately restore you the freedom of your limbs."

"I cannot give you that parole," the general replied with firmness; "I should take a false oath if I did. On the contrary, I swear to endeavour to fly."

"Bravo! well answered!" said the pirate, laughing; "in your place, I should have replied just the same; only, at the present moment, I believe, with the best will in the world, it would be impossible for you to go a step. In spite, therefore, of all you have said to me, I will restore both you and your servant to liberty, and you may make what use you like of it."

With a stroke of his machete he cut the cords which bound the arms of the general, and then performed the same service for the negro, Jupiter.

Turning to the general, the captain bathed his wounds with cold water, and

dressed them carefully; then, after placing provisions before the prisoners, to which the negro alone did honour, the pirate retired.

Towards noon the captain called together the principal men of his band.

"Caballeros," he said, "we cannot deny that we have lost the first rubber; the prisoners we have made are far from reimbursing our expenses; we cannot remain quiet under the effects of a check which dishonours us and renders us ridiculous. I am going to play a second game; this time if I do not win I shall be unlucky indeed. During my absence, watch well over the prisoners. Pay attention to my orders: if to-morrow, at midnight, I have not returned safe and sound among you, at a quarter-past midnight you will shoot the two prisoners; you perfectly understand?"

"Be at your ease, captain," Frank replied, in the name of his companions; "you may go as soon as you please; your orders shall be executed."

Upon this the captain left the grotto, to throw himself in the way of Loyal Heart.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A RUSE DE GUERRE.

AFTER his strange proposal to the hunters, the leader of the pirates retook the road to his den.

Everything was calm, nothing suspicious appeared, and he was about to launch into the stream when a slight noise in the bushes attracted his attention.

The pirate started; promptly drawing a pistol from his belt, he cocked it, and advanced boldly towards the spot whence this alarming noise proceeded.

A man bent towards the ground, was busy digging up herbs and plants with a small spade.

The pirate smiled, and replaced his pistol in his belt.

He had recognised the doctor, who was as much absorbed in his favourite passion as usual; so much so, indeed, that he had not perceived him.

After surveying him for an instant with disdain, the pirate was turning his back upon him, when an idea occurred to him, which made him, on the contrary, advance towards the *savant*, upon whose shoulder he somewhat roughly laid his hand.

"Holla! my good fellow," said the captain, "you are just the man we want. Come with me."

"But ——" the doctor would fain have objected.

"I admit of no excuses; follow me, or I will blow your brains out. Besides, don't be afraid, you run no risk; my men will pay you all the respect science is entitled to."

As resistance was impossible, the worthy man did as he was bidden with a good grace—with so good a grace, even, that for a second he allowed a smile to stray across his lips, which would have aroused the suspicion of the pirate if he had perceived it.

The captain commanded the *savant* to walk on before him, and both thus reached the river.

At the instant they quitted the place where this conversation had taken place. The branches of a bush parted slowly, and a head, shaven with the exception of a long tuft of hair at the top, on which was stuck an eagle's feather, appeared, and then a man, who bounded like a jaguar in pursuit of them.

This man was Eagle Head.

He was a silent spectator of the embarkation of the two whites, saw them enter

the grotto, and then, in his turn, disappeared in the shade of the woods, after muttering to himself in a low voice the word—

"*Och!*" (good) the highest expression of joy in the language of the Comanches.

The doctor had plainly only served as a bait to attract the pirate.

On the morrow, at daybreak, the pirate ordered a close battue to be made in the environs of the grotto; but no track existed.

The captain rubbed his hands with joy; his expedition had doubly succeeded, since he had managed to return to his cavern without being followed.

Certain of having nothing to dread, he was unwilling to keep about him so many men in a state of inactivity; placing, therefore, his troop provisionally under the command of Frank, a veteran bandit, in whom he had perfect confidence, he only retained ten chosen men with him, and sent away the rest.

When the pirates had left the grotto, the captain made a sign to the doctor to follow him, and conducted him to the general.

After having introduced them to each other with ironical politeness, the bandit retired.

The general and his negro, Jupiter, were confined in a compartment of the grotto at some distance from the outlet.

They were alone, for the captain had deemed it useless to keep guards constantly with them.

At sight of the *savant*, the dismal countenance of the general was lighted up by a fugitive smile of hope.

"Ah, doctor, is that you?" he said, holding out to him a hand, "have I reason to rejoice or to be still sad at your presence?"

"Are we alone?" the doctor asked, without answering the general's question.

"I believe so," he replied, in a tone of surprise; "at all events, it is easy to satisfy yourself."

The doctor carefully examined every corner; he then went back to the prisoners.

"We can talk," he said.

The *savant* was habitually so absorbed by his scientific calculations, and was naturally so absent, that the prisoners had but little confidence in him.

"And my niece?" the general asked, anxiously.

"Be at ease on her account; she is in safety with a hunter named Loyal Heart."

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Now I know my niece is safe, I can suffer anything."

"No, no," said the doctor, warmly, "on the contrary, you must escape from this place to-morrow, by some means."

"I ask no better than to do so."

"Your wounds appear slight; are they progressing towards cure?"

"I think so."

"Do you feel yourself able to walk?"

"Oh, yes!"

"But let us understand each other. I mean, are you able to walk a distance?"

"I believe so, if it be absolutely necessary."

Steps were heard approaching, and the captain appeared.

"Well!" he asked, "how are your patients going on?"

"Not too well," the doctor replied.

"Bah! bah!" the pirate resumed; "all that will come round; besides, the general will soon be free, then he can get well at his ease. Now, doctor, come along with me."

The doctor followed him without reply, after having made the general a parting sign to recommend prudence.

The day passed away without further incident.

Towards evening the worthy *savant* reappeared. He walked with a deliberate step, his countenance was cheerful, and he held a torch in his hand.

"What is there fresh, doctor?" the general asked; "you appear to be quite gay."

"By Galen! something very simple, but which you never would guess: all our bandits are asleep, we are masters of the grotto."

"That may be possible; but if they should wake?"

"Don't trouble yourself about that; they will wake, of that there is no doubt, but not within six hours at least."

"How the devil can you tell that?"

"Because I took upon myself to send them to sleep; that is to say, at their supper I served them with a decoction of opium, which brought them down like lumps of lead, and they have all been snoring ever since like so many forge-bellows."

"Oh, that is capital," said the general. "Come, let us lose no time."

The three men set off at once. In spite of the means employed by the doctor, the general and the negro were not quite at ease.

They arrived at the compartment which now served as a dormitory for the bandits; they were lying about asleep in all directions.

The fugitives passed safely through them.

When they reached the entrance of the grotto, at the moment they were about to cross the river, they saw, by the pale rays of the moon, a raft manned by fifteen men, who directed their course towards them.

Their retreat was cut off.

"What a fatality!" the general murmured.

"Oh!" said the doctor, piteously, "a plan of escape that cost me so much trouble to elaborate!"

The fugitives threw themselves into a cavity of the rocks, to avoid being seen, and there waited the landing of the new comers, whose manœuvres appeared more and more suspicious.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE LAW OF THE PRAIRIES.

A CONSIDERABLE space of ground, situated in front of the grotto inhabited by Loyal Heart, had been cleared, and nearly two hundred huts erected.

The whole tribe of the Comanches was encamped on this spot.

Among trappers, hunters, and red-skin warriors there existed the best possible understanding.

Hunters and red-skins were coming and going in a busy, pre-occupied manner.

But, strange to say, Loyal Heart, Eagle Head, and Black Elk were absent.

Belhumeur alone watched over the preparations that were being made, talking, the while, to the old Comanche chief *Eshis*, or the Sun.

But their countenances were stern, their brows thoughtful, and they appeared a prey to an overpowering pre-occupation.

It was the day fixed by the captain of the pirates for Dona Luz to be delivered up.

Would the captain come? Those who knew the pirate, and their number was great—almost all having suffered by his depredations—inclined to the affirmative.

This man was endowed, and it was the only quality they acknowledged in him, with a ferocious courage and an iron will.

If once he had affirmed he would do a thing, he did it, without regard to any body or any danger.

And then, what had he to dread in coming a second time amongst his enemies? Did he not hold the general in his power? the general, whose life answered for his own.

It was about eight o'clock in the morning, a brilliant sun shed its dazzling rays in profusion upon the picturesque scene.

All at once the Indian sentinels uttered a cry, which was immediately repeated by a man placed in front of the council lodge.

The hunters and Indian warriors seized their arms, and ranged themselves on either side of the grotto.

A cloud of dust rolled towards the camp with great rapidity, but was soon dispersed, and revealed a troop of horsemen riding at full speed.

At their head, upon a magnificent horse, black as night, came a man whom all immediately recognised.

This was Captain Waktehno, who came audaciously at the head of his troop, to claim the fulfilment of the odious bargain he had imposed three days before.

When he arrived in front of the chiefs drawn up before the council lodge, the twenty horsemen stopped suddenly, as if they had been changed into statues of bronze.

Scarcely had the pirates halted, ere the ranks of the warriors placed on the right and left of the lodge deployed like a fan, and closed behind them.

The twenty pirates found themselves by this movement, which was executed with incredible quickness, enclosed within a circle of more than five hundred men, well armed and equally well mounted.

The captain felt a slight tremor of uneasiness at the sight of this manœuvre. But surmounting this involuntary emotion, he smiled disdainfully.

He bowed slightly to the chiefs ranged before him, and addressed Belhumeur in a firm voice—

"Where is the girl?" he demanded.

"I do not know what you mean," the hunter replied; "I do not believe there is any young lady here upon whom you have any claim whatever."

"Oh, oh!" said the pirate; "what game are we playing now?"

"During ten years," Belhumeur said impassively, "at the head of a troop of bandits, without faith and without law, you have been the terror of the prairies, pillaging and assassinating white men and red men; for you are of no country, plunder and rapine being your only rule. This career of crime must have an end, and that end has now come. We have Indians and hunters assembled here to try you, and apply to you the implacable law of the prairies."

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," the assembled Indians and hunters cried, brandishing their arms.

A shudder passed through his limbs, a mortal pallor covered his face, for the pirate understood that he was confronted by a terrible danger; but he replied in a jeering voice—

"Dare but to touch a single hair of my head, and the general will immediately pay with his life for the insult you offer me. Believe me, then, my masters, you had better cease endeavouring to terrify me; give up to me with a good grace her whom I come to demand, or I swear to you, by God, that within an hour the general will be a dead man."

All at once a man broke through the crowd, and placing himself in front of the pirate, said—

"You are mistaken; the general is free!"

That man was Loyal Heart.

A hum of joy resounded from the ranks of the hunters and Indians, whilst a shudder of terror agitated the pirates.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE CHASTISEMENT.

THE general and his two companions had not remained long in a state of uncertainty.

The raft, after several attempts, came to shore at last, and fifteen men, armed with guns, advanced, and rushed into the grotto, uttering loud cries.

The fugitives ran towards them with joy; for they recognised at the head of them Loyal Heart, Eagle Head, and Black Elk.

After having devoted the first moment entirely to joy, and the pleasure of having succeeded without a blow being struck, the general informed his liberators that half a score bandits were sleeping in the grotto, under the influence of the worthy doctor's opium.

The pirates were strongly bound and carried away; then, after calling in the various detachments, the whole band again bent their way to the camp.

Great had been the surprise of the captain at the exclamation of Loyal Heart; but that surprise was changed into terror when he saw the general standing before him.

He saw at once that all his measures were defeated, his tricks circumvented, and that he was lost.

The blood mounted to his throat, his eyes darted lightning, and turning towards Loyal Heart, he said, in a hoarse loud voice—

"Well played! but all is not yet ended between us. By God's help I shall have my revenge!"

He made a gesture as if to put his horse in motion; but Loyal Heart held it resolutely by the bridle.

"Woe be to him who touches me!" he cried, with rage, "give me way!"

"No," the impassive hunter replied, "you are fairly taken, my master."

"Die then!" cried the pirate, aiming one of his pistols at Loyal Heart.

But, quick as thought, Belhumeur, who had watched his movements closely, threw himself before his friend with a swiftness increased tenfold by the seriousness of the situation.

The shot was fired. The ball struck the Canadian, who fell bathed in his blood.

"One!" cried the pirate, with a ferocious laugh.

"Two!" screamed Eagle Head, and with the bound of a panther, he leaped upon the pirate's horse behind him.

Before the captain could make a movement to defend himself, the Indian seized him with his left hand, by the long hair, of which he formed a tuft, and pulled him backwards violently, with his head downwards.

At the same time he pushed the bandit forcibly with his knee, and plunged the knife into his skull.

When he saw his captain fall, Frank, in the name of his companions, proclaimed that they surrendered. At a signal from Loyal Heart they laid down their arms and were bound.

Belhumeur, the brave Canadian, whose devotedness had saved the life of his friend, had received a serious but not mortal wound. He had been instantly lifted up and carried into the grotto, where the mother of the hunter paid him every attention.

Eagle Head approached Loyal Heart, who stood pensive and silent, leaning against a tree.

"The chiefs are assembled round the council-fire," he said, "and await my brother."

"I follow, my brother," the hunter replied, laconically.

When the two men entered the hut, all the chiefs were collected, among them were the general, Black Elk, and several other trappers.

Without loss of time the pirates were condemned to death, and, at the solicitation of Loyal Heart, were allowed to be their own executioners.

Loyal Heart advanced towards them, and said, "Here is my dagger; you shall be unbound, let it pass from hand to hand, and be buried in all your hearts in turn. The man who is free, and without hesitation kills himself at a single blow, is braver than he who, fastened to the stake of torture, and unable to endure the pain, insults his executioner in order to receive a prompt death."

The pirates consulted among themselves for an instant, and then cried with one voice—

"We accept your offer!"

"Unbind the prisoners," Loyal Heart commanded.

This order was immediately executed.

"Your dagger?" said Frank.

The hunter gave it to him.

"Thank you, and farewell!" said the pirate, in a firm voice; and, deliberately, with a smile, he buried the dagger up to the hilt in his heart.

"My turn!" cried the pirate next him, and plucking the still reeking dagger from the wound, he plunged it into his heart.

He fell upon the body of the first victim.

After him came the turn of another, then another, and so on; not one hesitated, not one displayed weakness—all fell smiling, and thanking Loyal Heart for the death they owed him.

There soon remained but one pirate. This man contemplated for a moment the heap of bodies which lay before him; then, drawing the dagger from the breast of him who had preceded him, he said with a smile—

"A fellow is lucky to die in such good company."

And with a gesture quick as thought he stabbed himself.

He fell instantly quite dead.

The formidable troop of Captain Wakteho was thus annihilated.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE PARDON.

THE interview between the general and his niece was most touching.

For a long time they forgot themselves in a delightful interchange of ideas; the general anxiously inquiring how she had lived while he was a prisoner—the girl questioning him upon the perils he had run and the ill-treatment he had suffered.

"Now, uncle," she said at length, "what is your intention?"

"Alas! my child," he replied, in a tone of sadness, and stifling a sigh; "we must without delay leave these terrible countries, and return to Mexico."

The heart of the young girl throbbed painfully, although she inwardly confessed the necessity for a prompt return. To leave the prairies would be to leave him she loved—to separate herself, without hope of a re-union, from a man whose admirable character every minute passed in sweet intercourse had made her more duly appreciate, and who had now become indispensable to her life and her happiness.

"What ails thee, my child? You are sad, and your eyes are full of tears," her uncle asked.

"Alas! dear uncle," she replied, in a plaintive tone; "how can I be otherwise than sad after all that has happened within the last few days?"

"That is true. The frightful events of which we have been the witnesses and the victims are more than enough to make you sad; but you are still very young. In a short time these events will only remain in your thoughts as the remembrance of facts which, thank Heaven! you will not have to dread in future."

"Then shall we depart soon?"

"To-morrow, if possible. What should I do here now? Heaven itself declares against me, since it obliges me to renounce this expedition, the success of which would have made the happiness of my old age; but God is not willing that I should be consoled. His will be done!" he added, in a tone of resignation.

"What do you mean, dear uncle?"

"Nothing that can interest you at present, my child. You had better, therefore, be ignorant of it, and that I should suffer alone. I am old. I am accustomed to sorrow," he said.

"My poor uncle!"

"Thank you for the kindness you evince, my child; but let us quit this subject that saddens you; let us speak a little, if you please, of the worthy people to whom we owe so many obligations."

"Of Loyal Heart?" Dona Luz murmured, with a blush.

"Yes," the general replied. "Loyal Heart and his mother; the excellent woman whom I have not yet been able to thank, on account of the wound of poor Belhumeur, and to whom it is due, you say, that you have not suffered any privations."

"She has had all the cares of a mother for me!"

"How can I ever acquit myself towards her and her noble son? She is blessed in having such a child! Alas! that comfort is not given to me—I am alone!" the general said, letting his head sink into his hands.

"And I?" said the maiden, in a faint voice.

"Oh! you?" he replied, embracing her tenderly; "you are my beloved daughter, but I have no son!"

"That is true!" she murmured, thoughtfully.

"Loyal Heart," the general continued, "is of too proud a nature to accept any thing. What am I to do? how acquit myself towards him? how acknowledge the immense services he has rendered me?"

There was a moment of silence.

Dona Luz inclined towards the general, and kissing his brow, she said to him in a low, tremulous voice, concealing her face upon his shoulder—

"Uncle, I have an idea."

"Speak, my darling," he replied, "speak without fear; it is, perhaps, God who inspires you."

"You have no son to whom you can bequeath your name and your immense fortune, have you, uncle?"

"Alas! I thought for a time, I might recover one, but that hope has vanished forever; you know, child, I am alone."

"Neither Loyal Heart nor his mother would accept anything from you."

"That I believe."

"And yet, I think there is a way of obliging them, of forcing them even."

"What is it?" he said, eagerly.

"Dear uncle, since you regret so much not having a son to whom you could, after you, leave your name, why not adopt Loyal Heart?"

The general looked at her, she was covered with blushes, and trembling like a leaf,

"Oh! darling!" he said, embracing her, "your idea is a charming one, but it is impracticable. I should be happy and proud to have a son like Loyal Heart. You yourself have told me how his mother adores him; she must be jealous of his love; she will never consent to share it with a stranger."

"Perhaps she might!" the young girl murmured.

"And then," the general added, "if even, which is impossible, his mother through love of him, in order to give him a rank in society, accepts my offer, mothers being capable of the noblest sacrifices to secure the happiness of their children, he himself would refuse. Can you believe, dearest, that this man, brought up in the desert, whose whole life has been passed among unexpected, exciting scenes, in face of sublime nature, would consent, for the sake of a little gold which he despises, and a name that is useless to him, to renounce that glorious life of adventures so full of pleasant and terrible emotions, which has become necessary to him? Oh, no! he would be stifled in our cities; to an exalted organisation like his our civilisation would be mortal. Forget this idea, my dear daughter. Alas! I feel convinced he would refuse."

"Who knows?" she said, shaking her head.

"God is my witness," the general resumed, earnestly, "that I should be most happy to succeed; all my wishes would be fulfilled. But why should I flatter myself with wild chimeras? He will refuse, I tell you!"

"Well, but try, uncle!" she said, coaxingly; "if your proposal be repulsed, you will at least have proved to Loyal Heart that you are not ungrateful, and that you have known how to appreciate him at his just value."

"Do you wish it?" said the general.

"I do wish it, uncle," she answered, embracing him. "I do not know why; it appears to me you will succeed."

"Well, so be it, then," the general murmured, with a melancholy smile. "Request Loyal Heart and his mother to come to me."

"In five minutes they shall be here!" she cried, radiant with joy.

And, bounding like a gazelle, the young girl disappeared, running along the windings of the grotto.

As soon as he was alone, the general hung his head, and fell into melancholy reflections.

A few minutes later, Loyal Heart and his mother, brought by Dona Luz, were before him.

The general raised his head, bowed with courtesy as they entered, and with a sign desired his niece to retire.

The young girl complied in great agitation.

"You have sent for us, general," Loyal Heart said, "and, as you see, we have hastened to obey."

"Thank you for your prompt attention, my friend," the general replied. "In the first place, receive the expression of my gratitude for the important services you have rendered me. What I say to you, my friend—permit me to give you that title—is addressed likewise to your good and excellent mother, for the tender care she has bestowed on my niece."

"General," the hunter replied, with emotion, "I thank you for these kind words, which amply repay me for what you think you owe me. In coming to your aid, I only accomplished a vow I have made never to leave my neighbour without help. Believe me I desire no other recompense but your esteem, and I am overpaid for the little I have done by the satisfaction I at this moment experience."

"I should wish, notwithstanding, permit me to repeat—I should wish notwithstanding, to reward you in another fashion."

"Reward me!" the fiery young man cried, colouring deeply, and drawing back.

"Allow me to finish," the general resumed, warmly; "if the proposition I submit to you displeases you, well, you can answer me, as frankly as I am about to explain myself."

"Speak, general, I will listen to you attentively."

"My friend, my journey into the prairies had a sacred object, which I have not been able to attain; you know the reason why—the men who followed me have died at my side. Left almost alone, I find myself forced to renounce a search which, if it had been crowned with success, would have constituted the happiness of the few years I have yet to live. God is chastising me. I have seen all my children die around me; one alone would, perhaps, still be left to me, but him, in a moment of senseless pride, I drove from my presence. Now, in the decline of life, my house is empty, my earth is solitary. I am alone, without relations, without friends, without an heir to whom I could bequeath not my fortune, but my name, which a long line of ancestors have transmitted to me. Will you replace for me the family I have lost? answer me, Loyal Heart, will you be to me a son?"

Whilst pronouncing the words, the general rose from his seat, seized the hand of the young man and pressed it warmly, his eyes filled with tears.

At this unexpected offer the hunter stood astonished, breathless, and not knowing what to reply.

His mother suddenly threw back her rebozo, and displaying her countenance glowing and transfigured, so to speak, with intense joy, stepped between the two men, placed her hand upon the shoulder of the general, looked at him earnestly, and in a voice rendered tremulous by emotion, exclaimed—

"At length, Don Ramon de Garillas, you recall that son whom twenty years ago you so cruelly abandoned!"

"Woman! what do you mean?" the general asked.

"I mean, Don Ramon," she replied, with an air of supreme majesty, "that I am Dona Jesuita, your wife, and that Loyal Heart is your son Rafaël, whom you cursed."

"Oh!" the general cried, falling on his knees, "pardon, pardon, my son!"

"My father!" Loyal Heart cried, springing towards him; "what are you doing?"

"My son," said the old man, almost wild with grief and joy, "I will not quit this posture until I have obtained your pardon."

"Arise, arise, Don Ramon!" said Dona Jesuita, "it is long since the hearts of the mother and the son have felt anything for you but love and respect."

"Oh!" cried the old man, embracing them closely by turns; "this is too much happiness—I do not deserve to be so happy after my cruel conduct."

"Father," the young man replied, nobly, "it is owing to the merited chastisement you inflicted upon me that I have become an honest man; forget the past, then, which is now nothing but a dream, think only of the future, which smiles upon you!"

At this moment Dona Luz appeared, blushing and timid.

As soon as he perceived her, the general took her by the hand, and led her to Dona Jesuita, whose arms were opened to receive her.

"My niece!" he said, with a face radiant with joy, "you may love Loyal Heart without fear, for he is really my son. God, in His infinite goodness has permitted that I should find him again at the moment when I despaired of such happiness!"

The young girl uttered a cry of joy, and concealed her blushing face in the bosom of Dona Jesuita, abandoning her hand to Rafaël, who covered it with kisses, while he fell at her feet.

THE END.

THE
BORDER RIFLES

A Narrative

BY

GUSTAVE AIMARD

AUTHOR OF "TRAPPERS OF ARKANSAS," "FREEBOOTERS," "WHITE SCALPER," ETC.

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NOTICE.

GUSTAVE AIMARD was the adopted son of one of the most powerful Indian tribes, with whom he lived for more than fifteen years in the heart of the Prairies, sharing their dangers and their combats, and accompanying them everywhere, rifle in one hand and tomahawk in the other. In turn squatter, hunter, trapper, warrior, and miner, GUSTAVE AIMARD has traversed America from the highest peaks of the Cordilleras to the ocean shores, living from hand to mouth, happy for the day, careless of the morrow. Hence it is that GUSTAVE AIMARD only describes his own life. The Indians of whom he speaks he has known—the manners he depicts are his own.

PREFACE

IN the series commencing with the "Trappers of Arkansas," GUSTAVE AIMARD has selected a magnificent episode of American history—the liberation of Texas from the intolerable yoke of the Mexicans. Surprising though the events may be which are narrated in the present volume, they are surpassed by those that continue the series. The next volume, the "Freebooters," describes the progress of the insurrection till it attained the proportions of a revolution, while the fourth and the last volume, entitled the "White Scalper," is devoted to the establishment of order in that magnificent State of Texas, which boldly relied upon the prowess of its sons, whose exploits Gustave Aimard has so admirably depicted in the present and the succeeding volumes of this, the first, series of his adventurous career.

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THE BORDER RIFLES

CHAPTER I.

THE RUNAWAY.

At the period when our narrative commences, that is to say, at the close of 1812, emigration had not yet assumed that vast extension it was soon to acquire. It was, however, beginning to be a favourite plan to leave the settlements and to seek a home in those vast forests, which, intervening between the United States and Mexico, had hitherto been abandoned to the red-skins, traders, and wood-rangers.

Our narrative commences in the centre of one of these mighty forests, on the afternoon of October 27th, 1812, and on the banks of a nameless affluent of the Arkansas; the slightly bowed trees on either side the stream formed a thick canopy of verdure over the waters, which were scarcely rippled by the inconstant breath of the breeze; here and there pink flamingos and white herons, perched on their tall legs, were fishing for their dinner, with that careless ease which generally characterises the race of great aquatic birds; but suddenly they stopped, stretched out their necks as if listening to some unusual sound, then ran hurriedly along to get to windward, and flew away with cries of alarm.

All at once the sound of a musket-shot was re-echoed through the forest, and two flamingos fell. At the same instant a light canoe doubled a little cape formed by some mangrove-trees jutting out into the bed of the stream, and darted in pursuit of the flamingos which had fallen in the water. One of them had been killed on the spot, and was drifting with the current; but the other, apparently but slightly wounded, was swimming vigorously.

The boat was an Indian canoe, made of birch bark removed from the tree by the aid of hot water, and there was only one man in it; his rifle, lying in the bows and still smoking, showed that it was he who had just fired.

As far as could be judged from his position in the canoe, he was a man of great height; his small head was attached by a powerful neck to shoulders of more than ordinary breadth; muscles, hard as cords, stood out on his arms at each of his movements; in a word, the whole appearance of this individual denoted more than average vigour.

His face, illuminated by large blue eyes, sparkling with humour, had an expression of frankness and honesty which pleased at the first glance, and completed the *ensemble* of his regular features. and wide mouth, round which an unceasing smile of

good humour played. He might be twenty-three, or twenty-four at the most, although his complexion, bronzed by the inclemency of the weather, and the ruddy brown beard that covered the lower part of his face, made him appear older.

This man was dressed in the garb of a wood-ranger: a beaver-skin cap, whose tail fell down between his shoulders, hardly restrained the thick curls of his golden hair, which hung in disorder down his back; a hunting-shirt of blue calico, fastened round his hips by a deer-skin belt, fell a little below his muscular knees; *mitasses*, or a species of tight drawers, covered his legs, and his feet were protected against brambles and the stings of reptiles by Indian mocassins.

His game-bag, of tanned leather, hung over his shoulder, and, like all the bold pioneers of the virgin forest, his weapons consisted of a good Kentucky rifle, a straight-bladed knife, ten inches long and two wide, and a tomahawk that glistened like a mirror. These weapons, of course, with the exception of the rifle, were passed through his belt, which also supported two buffalo horns filled with powder and bullets.

The appearance of the man thus equipped, and standing in the canoe, amid that imposing scenery, had something grand about it which created an involuntary respect.

The wood-ranger, properly so termed, is one of those numerous types of the New World which must soon entirely disappear before advancing civilisation.

The wood-rangers, those bold explorers of the deserts, in which their whole existence was spent, were men who, impelled by a spirit of independence, or an unbridled desire for liberty, shook off the trammels of society, and who, with no other object than that of living and dying unrestrained by any other will save their own, and in no way impelled by the hope of any sort of lucre, which they despised, abandoned the towns, and boldly buried themselves in the virgin forests, where they lived from day to day indifferent about the present, careless as to the future, convinced that God would not desert them in the hour of need, and thus placed themselves outside of that common law they misunderstood, on the extreme limit that separates barbarism from civilisation.

Most of the celebrated wood-rangers were French Canadians; in truth, there is in the Norman character something daring and adventurous, which is well adapted to this mode of life.

The Canadians never admitted in principle until lately the change of nationality which the English tried to impose upon them; they still regarded themselves as Frenchmen, and their eyes are constantly fixed on that ungrateful mother-country which abandoned them with such cruel indifference.

The hunter went on paddling vigorously; he soon reached the first flamingo, which he threw into the bottom of his canoe. But the second gave him more trouble. It was for awhile a struggle of speed between the wounded bird and the hunter: still the former gradually lost its strength; its movements became uncertain, and it beat the water convulsively. A blow from the Canadian's paddle at length put an end to its agony, and it joined its mate in the bottom of the canoe.

So soon as he had secured his game, the hunter shipped his paddles, and prepared to reload his rifle, with the care which all devote to the operation who know that their life depends on a charge of powder.

"Why," he presently said, talking to himself, a habit which men acquire in solitude, "hang me! if I have not reached the meeting-place without suspecting it. I cannot be mistaken; yonder are the two oaks fallen across each other, and that rock which stands out of the water. But what's that?" he exclaimed, as he cocked his rifle.

The furious barking of several dogs became suddenly audible in the centre of the forest: the bushes were parted eagerly, and a negro appeared on the top of the rock,

at which the Canadian was at this moment looking. This man, on reaching the extremity of the rock, stopped for an instant, and seemed to listen with every sign of extreme agitation. But this halt was short, for he had hardly rested there for a few seconds, ere, raising his eyes to heaven in despair, he leaped into the river, and swam vigorously towards the opposite bank.

The sound of the negro's fall into the water had hardly died away, when several dogs dashed on to the platform, and began a concert of horrible barking. These dogs were powerful animals; their tongues were pendant, their eyes infested with blood, and their hair standing on end, as if they had come a long distance.

The hunter shook his head several times while giving a glance of pity at the hapless negro, who was swimming with the energy of despair, and seizing his paddles, he turned his canoe toward him, with the evident intention of rendering him assistance.

"Hilloh, there!" a coarse voice said, "silence, you demons incarnate! silence, I tell you."

The dogs gave vent to a few whines of pain, and were suddenly silent. The individual who had reproofed the animals then said, in a louder key—

"Hilloh, you fellow in the canoe there!—hilloh!"

The Canadian had just pulled to the opposite bank; he ran his canoe on the sand, and then carelessly turned to the person who addressed him.

It was a man of middle height, muscular, and dressed like the majority of rich farmers. His face was brutal, crafty, and four persons, apparently servants, stood by his side; it is needless to say that all were armed.

The stream at this spot was about fifty yards wide, which temporarily established a respectable barrier between the negro and his pursuers.

"Are you by chance speaking to me?" asked the Canadian, in a somewhat contemptuous tone.

"Who else do you suppose?" the first speaker continued, angrily; "so try and answer my questions."

"And why should I answer them? Will you be good enough to tell me?" the Canadian continued, with a laugh.

"Because I order you to do so, you scoundrel!" the other said, brutally.

"Good-bye," said the hunter, and made a movement as if to retire.

"Stop where you are!" the American shouted, "or so truly as my name is John Davis I will put a bullet through your skull!"

Whilst uttering the threat he levelled his gun.

"Ah! ah!" the Canadian went on, with a laugh, "then you're John Davis, the famous slave-dealer?"

"Yes, I am," the other replied, harshly.

"Pardon me; hitherto I have only known you by reputation. By Jove! I am delighted to see you."

"Well, and now that you know me, are you disposed to answer my questions?"

"I must know their nature first, so you had better ask them."

"What has become of my slave?"

"Do you mean the man who leaped off the platform just before you reached it?"

"Yes. Where is he?"

"Here, by my side."

In fact, the negro, his strength and courage quite exhausted from the desperate efforts he had made during the obstinate pursuit of which he had been the object, had dragged himself to the spot where the Canadian stood, and now lay in a half-fainting condition at his feet.

On hearing the hunter reveal his presence so clearly, he clasped his hands with an effort, and raised toward him a face bathed in tears.

"Oh! master, master!" he cried, with an expression of agony impossible to render, "save me! save me!"

"Ah, ah!" John Davis shouted, with a grin, "I fancy we can come to an understanding, my fine fellow, and that you will not be sorry to gain the reward."

"In truth, I should not be sorry to hear the price set on human flesh in what is called your free country. Is the reward large?"

"Twenty dollars for a runaway nigger."

"Pooh!" the Canadian said, thrusting out his lower lip in disgust, "that is a trifle!"

"Do you think so?"

"Indeed I do."

"Still, I only ask you to do a very simple matter in order to earn them."

"What is that?"

"Tie that nigger, put him in your canoe, and bring him to me."

"Very good. It is not difficult, I allow; and when he is in your power, supposing I do what you wish, what do you intend doing with him?"

"That is not your business; but come! make up your mind; I have no time to waste in chattering. What is your decision?"

"This is what I have to say to you, Mr. John Davis, who hunt men with dogs less ferocious than yourself, which in obeying you only yield to their instincts—you are a villain! and if you only reckon on my help in regaining your negro, you may consider him lost."

"Ah, that is it!" the American shouted, as he gnashed his teeth furiously; "fire at him! fire! fire!"

And joining example to precept, he quickly shouldered his gun and fired. His servants imitated him, and four shots were confounded in a single explosion, which the echoes of the forest mournfully repeated.

CHAPTER II.

QUONIAM.

THE Canadian did not lose one of his adversaries' movements while he was speaking with them; hence, when the shots ordered by John Davis were fired, they proved ineffectual; he had rapidly hidden himself behind a tree, and the bullets whistled harmlessly past his ears.

The slave-dealer was furious at being thus foiled by the hunter; he gave him the most fearful threats, blasphemed, and stamped his foot in rage.

But threats and imprecations availed but little; unless they swam the river, which was impracticable, in the face of a man so resolute as the hunter seemed to be, there were no means of taking any vengeance on him, or capturing the slave he had taken under his protection.

While the American racked his brains to find an expedient that would enable him to gain the advantage, a bullet dashed the rifle he held in his hand to pieces.

"Accursed dog!" he yelled in his fury, "do you wish to assassinate me?"

"I should have a right to do so," the Canadian replied, "for I am only defending myself fairly, after your attempt to kill me; but I prefer dealing amicably with you, although I feel convinced I should be doing a great service to humanity by lodging a couple of slugs in your brain."

And a second bullet at this moment smashed the rifle one of the servants was reloading.

"Come, enough of this," the American shouted, greatly exasperated; "what do you want?"

"I told you—treat amicably with you."

"But on what conditions? tell me them at least."

"In a moment."

The rifle of the second servant was broken like that of the first: of the five men, three were now disarmed.

"Curses," the slave-dealer howled; "have you resolved to make a target of us in turn?"

"No, I only wish to equalise chances."

"But——"

"It is done now."

The fourth rifle was broken.

"And now," the Canadian said, as he showed himself, "suppose we have a talk."

And, leaving his shelter, he walked to the river-bank.

"Yes, talk, demon," the American shouted.

With a movement swift as thought, he seized the last rifle, and shouldered it; but, ere he could pull the trigger, he rolled on the platform, uttering a cry of pain.

The hunter's bullet had broken his arm.

"Wait for me, I am coming," the Canadian continued.

He reloaded his rifle, leaped into the canoe, and with a few strokes found himself on the other side.

"There," he said as he landed and walked up to the American, who was writhing like a serpent on the platform, howling and blaspheming; "I warned you: I only wished to equalise the chances, and you have no right to complain of what has happened to you, my dear sir: the fault rests entirely with yourself."

"Seize him! kill him!" the wretch shouted.

"Come, come, calm yourself. Good gracious, you have only a broken arm, after all; remember, I could have easily killed you, had I pleased."

"Oh! I will kill him," he yelled, as he gnashed his teeth.

"I hardly think so, at present; I will say nothing about by-and-by. But let me examine your wound while we talk."

"Do not touch me! do not come near me, or I know not to what extremities I may proceed."

The Canadian shrugged his shoulders.

"You must be mad," he said.

Incapable of enduring longer the state of exasperation in which he was, the dealer, who was also weakened by the loss of blood, made a vain effort to rise and rush on his foe; but he fell back and fainted while muttering a final curse.

The servants stood startled, as much by the unparalleled skill of this strange man, as by the boldness with which, after disarming them in turn, he had crossed the river, in order, as it were, to deliver himself into their hands; for their knives and pistols were left them.

"Come, gentlemen," the Canadian said with a frown, "have the goodness to shake out the priming of your pistols, or, by Heaven! we shall have a row."

The servants did not at all desire to begin a fight with him; moreover, the sympathy they felt for their master was not great, while, on the other hand, the Canadian, owing to the expeditious way in which he had acted, inspired them with a superstitious fear: hence they obeyed his orders with a species of eagerness, and even wished to hand him their knives.

"It is not necessary," he said; "now let us see about dressing this worthy

gentleman's wound: it would be a pity to deprive society of so estimable a person."

He set to work at once, aided by the servants, who executed his orders with extraordinary rapidity and zeal.

Compelled by the mode of life they pass to do without any strange assistance, the wood-rangers all possess, to a certain extent, elementary notions of medicine, and especially of surgery, and can, in case of need, treat a fracture or wound of any nature as well as a professional man; and that, too, by simple means usually employed with the greatest success by the Indians.

The hunter proved by the dexterity with which he dressed the slave-dealer's wound, that, if he knew how to inflict wounds, he was equally clever in curing them.

During the bandaging, the wounded man returned to consciousness, and opened his eyes, but remained silent; his fury had been calmed, and his brutal nature subdued by the energetic resistance of the Canadian. The first and burning pain of the wound had been succeeded, as always happens when the bandaging is properly done, by an extraordinary feeling of relief: hence, recognising, in spite of himself, the comfort he experienced, he felt his hatred melting away in a feeling for which he could not yet account, but which now made him regard his enemy almost with a friendly air.

To render John Davis justice, we will say that he was neither better nor worse than any of his fellows who trafficked in human flesh. Accustomed to the sufferings of slaves, who to him were nothing but merchandise, his heart had gradually grown callous; he only saw in a negro the money he had expended, and like a true tradesman, he was very fond of money: a runaway negro seemed to him a wretched thief, against whom any means were permissible in order to prevent a loss.

Still, this man was not insensible to every good feeling; apart from his trade, he even enjoyed a certain reputation for kindness, and passed for a gentleman.

"That is all right," the Canadian said, as he gave a glance at the bandages; "in three weeks there will be nothing to be seen, if you take care of yourself; for, through a remarkable piece of good luck, the bone has not been touched. Now, my good friend, if you like to talk, I am ready."

"I have nothing to say, except to ask you to return the scoundrel who is the cause of the whole mishap."

"Hum! if we go on in that way, I am afraid we shall not come to an understanding. You know perfectly that the whole quarrel arose about the surrender of the scoundrel, as you term him."

"Still, I cannot lose my money."

"What money do you mean?"

"Well, my slave, if you prefer it; he represents a sum I do not at all care to lose; the less so, because things have been going very queerly with me lately."

"That is annoying, and I pity you sincerely; still, I should like to settle the affair as amicably as I can," the Canadian continued.

The American made a grimace.

"It is a deuced amicable way you have of settling matters," he said.

"It is your fault, my friend; if we did not come to an immediate arrangement, it was because you were a little too quick, as you will allow."

"Well, we will not say any more about that, for what's done cannot be undone."

"You are right, so let us return to business. Unluckily, I am poor; were I not so, I would give you a few hundred dollars, and all would be settled."

"Listen," said the dealer; "I do not know why, but, in spite of all that has passed between us, perhaps in consequence of it, I should not like for us to separate on bad terms; the more so, because, to tell you the truth, I care very little for Quoniam."

"Oh, very good, that's a funny name you have given him; however, no matter. you say you care very little for him?"

"Indeed I do,"

"Then why did you begin the obstinate hunt with dogs and guns?"

"Through pride,"

"Oh!" the Canadian said, with a start of dissatisfaction,

"Listen to me; I am a slave-dealer."

"A very ugly trade, by the way," the hunter observed.

"Perhaps so, but I shall not discuss that point.

"About a month ago, a large sale was announced at Batonrouge, of slaves of both sexes, belonging to a rich gentleman who had died suddenly. Among the slaves exposed for sale was Quoniam. The rascal is young, active, and vigorous; he has a bold and intelligent look; so he naturally pleased me at the first glance, and I felt desirous to buy him. I went up and questioned him; and the scamp answered me word for word as follows, which put me out of countenance for a moment—

"'Master, I do not advise you to buy me, for I have sworn to be free or die; whatever you may do to prevent me, I warn you that I shall escape. Now you can do as you please.'

"This clear and peremptory declaration piqued me. 'We shall see,' I said to him, and then went to find the auctioneer. The latter, who was a friend of mine, dissuaded me from buying Quoniam, giving me reasons against doing so. But my mind was made up, and I stuck to it. Quoniam was knocked down to me for ninety dollars, an absurd price for a negro of his age, and built as he is; but no one would have him. I put irons on him, and took him away, not to my house, but to the prison, so that I might feel sure he would not escape. The next day, when I returned to the prison, Quoniam was gone.

"At the end of two days he was caught again; the same evening he was off once more, and it was impossible for me to discover how he had foiled the plans I had formed to restrain him. This has been going on for a month; a week ago he escaped again, and since then I have been in search of him; despairing of being able to keep him, I got into a passion, and started after him, this time with my blood-hounds, resolved to finish, once for all, with this accursed negro.

"That is to say," the Canadian remarked, "you would not have hesitated to kill him."

"That I should, for the confounded scamp is so crafty; he has so constantly taken me in, that I have grown to hate him."

"Listen in your turn, Mr. John Davis; I am not rich, but a long way from it. I need no gold or silver in the desert, where Heaven supplies daily food so liberally. But this Quoniam, who is so eager for liberty and the open air, inspires me with a lively interest. This is what I propose: I have in my canoe three jaguar-skins and twelve beaver-skins, which, if sold at any town of the Union, will be worth from one hundred and fifty to two hundred dollars; take them, and let all be finished."

The dealer looked at him with a surprise mingled with a certain degree of kindness.

"You are wrong," he said; "the bargain you offer is too advantageous for me, and too little so for you."

"How does that concern you? I have got it in my head that this man shall be free."

"You do not know the ungrateful nature of niggers," the other persisted; "this one will be in no way grateful to you for what you do for him; on the contrary, he will probably give you cause to repent your good action."

"That is possible, but it is his business, for I do not ask gratitude of him; if he shows it, all the better for him; if not, the Lord's will be done! I act in accordance with my heart, and my reward is in my conscience."

"By the Lord, you are a fine fellow, I tell you," the dealer exclaimed. "It would be all the better if a fellow could meet with more of your sort. Well, I intend to prove to you that I am not so bad as you have a right to suppose. I will sign the assignment of Quoniam to you, and I will only accept in return one tiger-skin in remembrance of our meeting, although," he added, as he pointed to his arm, "you have already given me another."

"Done," the Canadian exclaimed, eagerly; "but you must take two skins instead of one, as I intend to ask of you a rifle, an axe, and a knife, so that the poor devil we now set at liberty may provide for his support."

"Be it so," the dealer said, good-humouredly; "as the scoundrel insists on being at liberty, let him be, and he can go to the deuce."

At a sign from his master, one of the servants produced from his bag, ink, pens, and paper, and drew up on the spot, not a deed of sale, but a regular ticket of freedom, to which the dealer put his signature.

"On my word," John Davis exclaimed, "it is possible that from a business point of view I have done a foolish thing, but, you may believe me or not, as you like, I never yet felt so satisfied with myself."

"That is," the Canadian answered, "because you have to-day followed the impulses of your heart."

The Canadian then quitted the platform to go and fetch the skins. A moment after, he returned with two magnificent jaguar-hides, perfectly intact, which he handed to the dealer. The latter, as was arranged, then delivered the weapons to him; but a scruple suddenly assailed the hunter.

"One moment," he said; "if you give me these weapons, how will you manage to return to town?"

"That need not trouble you," John Davis replied; "I left my horse and people scarce three leagues from here. Besides, we have our pistols."

"That is true," the Canadian remarked; "you have therefore nothing to fear; still, as your wound will not allow you to go so far a-foot, I will help your servants to prepare you a litter."

And with that skill of which he had already supplied so many proofs, the Canadian manufactured a litter, on which the two tiger-skins were laid.

"And now," he said, "good-bye; perhaps we shall never meet again. We part, I trust, on better terms than we came together: remember, there is no trade, however shameful, which an honest man cannot carry on honourably; when your heart inspires you to do a good action, do not be deaf to it, but do it without regret."

"Thanks," the dealer said, with considerable emotion, "but grant me one word before we part."

"Say on."

"Tell me your name, so that if any day accident brought us together again, I might appeal to your recollections, as you could to mine."

"That is true; my name is Tranquil, surnamed the Panther-killer."

And, ere the slave-dealer had recovered from the astonishment caused by this sudden revelation of the name of a man whose renown was universal on the border, the hunter bounded from the platform, unfastened his canoe, and paddled vigorously to the other bank.

"Tranquil, the Panther-killer," John Davis muttered when he was alone; "it was truly my good genius which inspired me to make a friend of that man."

CHAPTER III.

BLACK AND WHITE.

I., the meanwhile, the Canadian hunter, whose name we now know, had reached the bank of the river where he left the negro concealed in the shrubs.

During the long absence of his defender, the slave could easily have fled, and that with the more reason, because he had almost the certainty of not being pursued before a lapse of time, which would have given him a considerable start.

He had not done so, however, either because the idea of flight did not appear realisable, or because he was too wearied ; he had not stirred from the spot where he sought a refuge at the first moment, and had remained with his eyes obstinately fixed on the platform.

John Davis had not at all flattered him in the portrait he had drawn. Quoniam was one of the most magnificent specimens of the African race : twenty-two years of age at the most, he was tall, well-proportioned, and powerfully built ; he had wide shoulders, powerfully-developed chest, and well-made limbs ; it was plain that he combined unequalled strength with far from ordinary speed and lightness ; his features were fine and expressive, his countenance breathed frankness, his widely-opened eyes were intelligent—in short, although his skin was of the deepest black, and unfortunately, in America, the land of liberty, that colour was an indelible stigma of servitude, this man did not seem at all to have been created for slavery, for everything about him aspired to liberty and that free will which God has given to his creatures, and man has tried in vain to tear from them.

When the Canadian re-entered the canoe, and the American quitted the platform, a sigh of satisfaction expanded the negro's chest, for, without knowing positively what had passed, as he was too far off to hear what was said, he understood that temporarily, at least, he had nothing to fear from the latter, and he awaited with impatience the return of his generous defender, that he might learn from him what he had henceforth to hope.

So soon as he reached land, the Canadian walked with a firm and deliberate step toward the spot where he expected to find the negro.

He soon noticed him in a sitting posture, almost at the same spot where he had left him.

The hunter could not repress a smile of satisfaction.

"Ah, ah," he said, "there you are, Quoniam."

"Yes, master. Did John Davis tell you my name?"

"As you see ; but what are you doing there ? why did you not escape during my absence ?"

"Quoniam is no coward," he replied, "to escape while another is risking his life. I was waiting ready to surrender if the white hunter's life had been threatened."

This was said with a simplicity full of grandeur, proving that such was really the negro's intention.

"Good !" the hunter replied, kindly, "I thank you, for your intention was good ; fortunately, your interference was unneeded."

"Whatever may happen to me, master, be assured that I shall ever feel grateful to you."

"All the better for you, Quoniam ; but be good enough not to call me master, it grieves me ; the word implies a degrading inferiority, and besides, I am not your master, but merely your companion."

"What other name can a poor slave give you?"

"My own, hang it. Call me Tranquil, as I call you Quoniam. Tranquil is not a difficult name to remember."

"Oh, not at all," the negro said with a laugh.

"Good! that is settled, then; now, let us go to something else, and, in the first place, take this."

The hunter drew a paper from his belt, which he handed to the black.

"What is this?" the latter asked with a timid glance.

"That?" the hunter said with a smile; "it is a precious talisman, which makes of you a man like all the rest of us, and removes you from the animals among which you have been counted up to this day; in a word, it is the deed by which John Davis, native of South Carolina, slave-dealer, from this day restores to Quoniam his full and entire liberty, to enjoy it as he thinks proper."

On hearing these words the negro turned pale after the fashion of men of his colour; that is to say, his face assumed a tinge of dirty grey, his eyes were unnaturally dilated, and for a few seconds he remained motionless, crushed, incapable of uttering a word.

At length he burst into a loud laugh, leaped wildly up twice or thrice, and broke suddenly into tears.

The hunter watched the negro's movement, feeling interested to the highest degree in what he saw, and feeling each moment a greater sympathy with this man.

"Then," the black at length said, "I am free?"

"As free as a man can be," Tranquil replied, with a smile.

"Now I can come, go, sleep, work, or rest, and no one can prevent me, and I need not fear the lash?"

"Quite so."

"I belong to myself, myself alone? I can act and think like other men? I am as good as any other man, white, yellow, or red?"

"Quite so," the hunter answered, amused and interested at the same time by these simple questions.

"Oh!" the negro said, as he took his head in his hands, "I am free then—free at last!"

Then he fell on his knees, clasped his hands, and raised his eyes to Heaven.

"My God!" he exclaimed, with an accent of ineffable happiness. "Thou who canst do all, thou to whom all men are equal, and who dost not regard their colour to protect and defend them. Thou, whose goodness is unbounded like thy power; thanks! thanks! my God, for having drawn me from slavery, and restored my liberty!"

After giving vent to this prayer, which was the expression of the feelings that boiled in his heart, the negro fell on the ground, and for some minutes remained plunged in earnest thought.

"Listen, hunter," he said, at length. "I have returned thanks to God for my deliverance, as was my duty; for it was He who inspired you with the thought of defending me. Now that I am beginning to grow a little calmer, and feel accustomed to my new condition, be good enough to tell me what passed between you and my master, that I may know the extent of the debt I owe you."

"What need to tell you a story which can interest you so slightly? You are free, that is sufficient."

"No, that is not sufficient; I am free, that is true, but how have I become so? that is what I do not know, and I have the right to ask of you."

Tranquil, who could no longer refuse, told in all their details the events that happened between himself and the slave-dealer, and when he had finished, added—

"Well, are you satisfied now?"

"Yes," the negro replied, who had listened to him with the most sustained attention. "I know that, next to God, I owe everything to you, and I will remember it."

"You owe me nothing, now that you are free; it is your duty to employ that liberty in the way a man of upright and honest heart should do."

"I will try not to prove myself unworthy of what God and you have done for me; I also thank John Davis sincerely for the good feeling that urged him to listen to your remonstrances; perhaps I may be able to requite him some day."

"Good! I like to hear you speak so, for it proves to me that I was not mistaken about you; and now what do you intend to do?"

"What advice do you give me?"

"The question you ask is a serious one, and I hardly know how to answer it; the choice of a profession is always a difficult affair, and must be reflected upon ripely before a decision is formed; in spite of my desire to be of service to you, I should not like to give you advice, which you would doubtless follow for my sake, and which might presently cause you regret. Besides, I am a man whose life since the age of seven has been spent in the woods, and I am, consequently, far too unacquainted with what is called the world to venture to lead you on a path which I do not know myself."

"That reasoning seems to me perfectly correct. Still, I cannot remain here, and must make up my mind to something or other."

"Here are a knife, gun, powder, and bullets; the desert is open before you, so go and try for a few days the free life of the great solitudes; during your long hours of hunting you will have leisure to reflect on the vocation you are desirous to embrace; you will weigh in your mind the advantages you expect to derive from it, and then, when your mind is quite made up, you can turn your back on the desert, go back to the towns, and, as you are an active, honest, and intelligent man, I am certain you will succeed in whatever calling you may choose."

The negro nodded his head several times.

"Yes," he said, "in what you propose to me there is both good and bad, but it is not what I should wish."

"Explain yourself clearly, Quoniam; I can see you have something at the end of your tongue."

"That is true; I have not been frank with you, Tranquil, and I was wrong, as I now see clearly. Instead of asking you hypocritically for advice, which I did not at all intend to follow, I ought to have told you honestly my way of thinking."

"Come," the hunter said, laughingly, "speak."

"Well, really I do not see why I should not tell you what I have on my heart. It is in the desert I desire henceforth to live, only visiting the towns to exchange the skins of animals I have killed for powder, bullets, and clothing. I am young and strong, and the God who has hitherto protected me will not desert me."

"You are perhaps right, and I cannot blame you for wishing to follow my example, when the life I lead seems to me preferable to all others. Well, now that is all settled, my good Quoniam, we can part, and I wish you luck; perhaps we shall meet again."

The negro began laughing, and showed two rows of teeth white as snow, but made no reply.

Tranquil threw his rifle on his shoulder, gave him a last sign of parting, and turned to go to his canoe.

Quoniam seized the rifle the hunter had left him, passed the knife through his girdle, to which he also fastened the horns of powder and bullets, and then, after a final glance to see he had forgotten nothing, followed the hunter.

He caught Tranquil up at the moment he reached his canoe, and was about to thrust it into the water; at the sound of footsteps, the hunter turned round.

"Holloh," he said, "is that you again, Quoniam?"

"Yes," he answered.

"What brings you here?"

"Why," the negro said, as he buried his fingers in his woolly hair, "you have forgotten something."

"What was it?"

"To take me with you."

"That is true," the hunter said, as he offered him his hand; "forgive me, brother."

"Oh, then," exclaimed the negro, with a joyous outburst of laughter, "we shall be together a long time."

"Well, be it so," the Canadian went on. "Come; two men, when they have faith in each other, are very strong in the desert. Heaven, doubtless, willed that we should meet. Henceforth we shall be brothers."

Quoniam leaped into the canoe, and gaily caught up the paddles.

The poor slave had never been so happy; never had the air seemed to him purer, or nature more lovely—everything smiled on him, and made holiday for him, for that moment he was about to begin really living the life of other men; the past was no more than a dream. He had found in his defender what so many men seek in vain, throughout a lengthened existence—a friend, a brother, to whom he could trust entirely.

In a few minutes they reached the spot which the Canadian had noticed on his arrival; this spot, clearly indicated by the two oaks which had fallen in a cross, formed a species of small sandy promontory, favourable to the establishment of a night bivouac.

"We will pass the night here," Tranquil said; "let us carry up the canoe, so as to shelter our fire."

Quoniam seized the light skiff, and placing it on his muscular shoulders, carried it to the spot.

In the meanwhile, a considerable period had elapsed since the Canadian and the negro met so miraculously. The sun, which had been low when the hunter doubled the promontory and chased the herons, was now disappearing; night was falling rapidly, and the background of the landscape was beginning to be confused in the shades of night, which grew momentarily denser.

The hunter chose the driest wood he could find to kindle the fire, in order that there might be no smoke, and the flame might light up the vicinity, so as to reveal at once the approach of the dangerous neighbours whose cries they could hear, and whom thirst would not fail soon to bring toward them.

The roasted birds and a few handfuls of pemmican composed the supper, a very sober meal, only washed down with water from the river, but which they ate with good appetite, like men who knew fully how to appreciate the value of food, however scanty.

When the last mouthful was swallowed, the Canadian fraternally shared his stock of tobacco with his new comrade, and lit his Indian pipe, in which he was scrupulously imitated by Quoniam.

"Now," said Tranquil, "it is as well you should know that an old friend of mine gave me rendezvous at this spot about three months ago; he will arrive at daybreak to-morrow. He is an Indian chief, and, although still very young, enjoys a great reputation. I love him as a brother; we were brought up together. I shall be glad to see you gain his favour, for he is a wise and experienced man. The friendship of an Indian chief is a precious thing to a wood-ranger, remember that. However, I feel certain you will be good friends at once."

"I will do all that is required. It is sufficient that the chief is your friend, for me

to desire that he shall become mine. Up to the present, though I have wandered about the woods a long time as a runaway slave, I have never seen an Indian; hence it is possible that I may commit some awkwardness. But be assured that it will not happen through any fault of mine."

"I am convinced of it, so be easy on that head. I will warn the chief, who, I fancy, will be as surprised as yourself, for I expect you will be the first person of your colour he has ever met. But night has now quite set in; you must be fatigued by the obstinate pursuit you experienced the whole day, and the powerful emotion you endured; sleep, while I watch for both."

The negro was literally exhausted with fatigue; he had been hunted so closely by his ex-master's blood-hounds, that for four days he had not closed his eyes. Hence, he at once stretched out his feet to the fire, and slept almost immediately.

Tranquil remained seated on the canoe with his rifle between his legs, to be prepared for the slightest alarm, and plunged into deep thought, while attentively watching the neighbourhood, and pricking his ear at the slightest noise.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MANADA.

THE night was splendid, the dark blue sky was studded with millions of stars. The silence of the desert was traversed by thousands of melodious and animated whispers; gleams, flashing through the shadows, ran over the grass like will-o'-the-wisps. On the opposite bank of the river the old moss-clad oaks stood out like phantoms, and waved in the breeze their long branches covered with lichens and lianas; vague sounds ran through the air, nameless cries emerged from the forest lairs, the gentle sighing of the wind in the foliage was heard, and then the murmur of the water on the pebbles, and last, that inexplicable sound of buzzing life that comes from God, and which the majestic solitude of the American savannah renders more imposing.

The hours passed thus rapidly with the hunter, though slumber did not once close his eyelids. Already the cold morning breeze was curling the tops of the trees, and rippling the surface of the stream, whose silvery waters reflected the shadows on its irregular banks; on the horizon broad pink stripes revealed the speedy dawn of day. The owl, hidden beneath the foliage, had twice saluted the return of light, with its melancholy too-whit—it was about three o'clock in the morning.

Tranquil left the rustic seat on which he had hitherto remained, shook off the stiffening feeling which had seized on him, and walked a few paces up and down the sand to restore the circulation in his limbs.

When a man, we will not say awakes—for the worthy Canadian had not closed his eyes once during the whole of this long watch—but shakes off the torpor into which the silence, darkness, and, above all, the piercing cold of night have plunged him, he requires a few minutes to regain possession of his faculties, and restore perfect lucidity of mind. But to the hunter, long habituated to desert life, the time was shorter than to another, and he was soon as acute and watchful as he had been on the previous evening; he therefore prepared to arouse his comrade, who was still enjoying good and refreshing sleep, when he suddenly stopped, and began listening anxiously.

From the remote depths of the forest, the Canadian had heard an inexplicable

rumour, which increased with every moment, and soon assumed the proportions of hoarsely-rolling thunder.

This noise approached; it seemed like sharp and hurried stamping of hoofs, rustling of trees and branches, hoarse bellowing, with nothing human about it; in short, it was a frightful, inexplicable sound, momentarily growing louder and louder.

Quoniam, startled by the strange noise, was standing, rifle in hand, with his eye fixed on the hunter, ready to act at the first sign, though unable to account for what was occurring, a prey to that instinctive terror which assails the bravest man when he feels himself menaced by a terrible and unknown danger.

"What is to be done?" Tranquil murmured.

All at once a shrill whistle was audible a short distance off.

"Ah," Tranquil exclaimed, with a start of joy as he threw up his head, "now I shall know what I have to depend upon."

And, placing his fingers in his mouth, he imitated the cry of the heron; at the same moment a man bounded from the forest, and with two tiger-like leaps was by the hunter's side.

"Wah!" he exclaimed, "what is my brother doing here?"

It was Black-deer, the Indian chief.

"I am awaiting you, chief," the Canadian answered.

The red-skin was a man of twenty-six to twenty-seven years of age, of middle height, but admirably proportioned. He wore the great war-garb of his nation, and was painted and armed as if on the war-trail; his face was handsome, his features intelligent, and his whole countenance indicated bravery and kindness.

At this moment he seemed suffering from an agitation, the more extraordinary because the red-skins make it a point of honour never to appear affected by any event, however terrible in its nature; his eyes flashed fire, his words were quick and harsh, and his voice had a metallic accent.

"Quick—the buffalos!" he said; "we have lost too much time."

Tranquil understood all; the noise he had heard for some time past was occasioned by a *manada* of buffalos, coming from the east, and probably proceeding to the higher western prairies.

The position of the three hunters was consequently extremely critical, for hazard had placed them exactly in front of a *manada*, or herd of buffalos, which was coming towards them at lightning speed.

Flight was impossible, and could not be thought of, while resistance was more impossible still.

The noise approached with fearful rapidity; already the savage bellowing of the buffalos could be distinctly heard, mingled with the barking of the prairie wolves; and the shrill miauls of the jaguars which dashed along on the flanks of the *manada*, chasing the laggards or those that imprudently turned to the right or left.

Within a quarter of an hour all would be over; the hideous avalanche already appeared, sweeping away all in its passage with that irresistible brute force which nothing can overcome.

We repeat it, the position was critical.

Black-deer was proceeding to the meeting-place he had himself indicated to the Canadian hunter, and was not more than three or four leagues from the spot where he expected to find him, when his practised ear caught the sound of the mad chase of the buffalos. Five minutes had sufficed for him to recognise the imminence of the danger his friend incurred; with that rapidity of decision which characterises red-skins, he had resolved to warn his friend, and to save or perish with him. He had then rushed forward, leaping with headlong speed over the space that separated him from the place of meeting, having only one thought, that of distancing the

manada, so that the hunter might escape. Unhappily, however quickly he went—and the Indians are remarkable for their fabulous agility—he had not been able to arrive soon enough to save his friend.

When the chief, after warning the hunter, recognised the futility of his efforts, a sudden change took place in him. His features resumed their old stoicism, a sad smile played around his lips, and he sank to the ground.

"The Wacondah would not permit it."

But Tranquil did not accept the position with the same resignation and fatalism, for he belonged to that race of energetic men whose powerful character causes them to struggle to their dying breath.

When he saw that the red-skin, with the fatalism peculiar to his race, gave up the contest for life, he resolved to make a supreme effort.

About twenty yards in front of the spot where the hunter had established his bivouac, were several trees lying on the ground, dead, and, as it were, piled on each other; then, behind this species of breastwork a clump of five or six oaks grew, isolated from all the rest, and formed a sort of oasis in the midst of the sand on the river-bank.

"Quick!" the hunter shouted. "Quoniam, pick up as much dead wood as you can, and come here. Chief, do the same."

The two men obeyed without comprehending, but reassured by their comrade's coolness.

In a few minutes a considerable pile of dead wood was piled over the fallen oaks.

"Good!" the hunter exclaimed; "all is not lost yet."

Then, carrying to this improvised bonfire the remains of the fire he had lit at his bivouac, to defeat the night cold, he enlarged the flames with resinous matters, and in less than five minutes a large column rose whirling to the clouds, and soon formed a dense curtain more than ten yards in width.

"Back! back!" the hunter then shouted—"follow me."

Black-deer and Quoniam dashed after him.

The Canadian did not go far; on reaching the clump of trees we have alluded to, he clambered up the largest with unparalleled skill and agility, and soon he and his comrades found themselves perched a height of fifty feet in the air, comfortably lodged on strong branches, and completely concealed by the foliage.

"There," the Canadian said, with the utmost coolness, "this is our last resource; so soon as the column appears fire at the leaders; if the flash startles the buffalos, we are saved; if not, we shall only have death to await. But, at any rate, we shall have done all that was humanly possible to save our lives."

The fire kindled by the hunter had assumed gigantic proportions; it had extended from tree to tree, lighting up the grass and shrubs, and though too remote from the forest to kindle it, it soon formed a curtain of flames nearly a quarter of a mile in length, whose reddish gleam tinged the sky for a long distance.

From the spots where the hunters sat they commanded this ocean of flame, which could not reach them.

All at once a terrible crash was heard, and the vanguard of the manada appeared.

"Look out!" the hunter shouted, as he shouldered his rifle.

The buffalos, startled by the sight of this wall of flame that rose suddenly before them, dazzled by the glare, and at the same time affected by its extreme heat, hesitated for an instant, as if consulting, but then rushed forward with blind rage, and uttering snorts of fury.

Three shots were fired.

The three leading buffalos fell and rolled in the agonies of death

"We are lost!" Tranquil said, coldly.

The buffalos still advanced.

But soon the heat became insupportable; the smoke, driven in the direction of the manada by the wind, blinded the animals; then a reaction was effected; there was a delay, soon followed by a recoil.

The hunters followed the strange interludes of this terrible scene. A question of life or death for them was being decided, and their existence hung on a thread.

In the meanwhile the mass still pushed onward. The animals that led the manada could not resist the pressure of those that followed; they were thrown down and trampled under foot by the rear, but the latter, assailed in their turn by the heat, also tried to turn back. At this moment some of the buffalos diverged to the right and left; this was enough, the others followed them: two currents were established on either side the fire, and the manada, cut in two, overflowed like a torrent that has burst its dykes, and crossing the stream in close column.

Terrible was the spectacle presented by this manada flying in horror, pursued by wild beasts, and enclosing, amid its ranks, the fire kindled by the hunter, and which seemed like a gloomy lighthouse intended to indicate the track.

They soon plunged into the stream, which they crossed in a straight line, and their long serried columns glided up on the bank.

The hunters were saved by the coolness and presence of mind of the Canadian; still, for nearly two hours longer, they remained concealed among the branches that sheltered them.

The buffalos continued to pass on their right and left. The fire had gone out through lack of nourishment, but the direction had been given, and, on reaching the fire, which was now but a pile of ashes, the column separated of its own accord into two parts.

At length the rearguard made its appearance, harassed by the jaguars that leaped on their back and flank. The desert, whose silence had been temporarily disturbed, fell back into its usual calmness, and merely a wide track made through the heart of the forest, and covered with fallen trees, testified to the furious passage of this disorderly herd.

The hunters breathed again; they could now leave their airy fortress, and go back again to earth.

CHAPTER V.

BLACK-DEER.

So soon as the three rangers descended, they collected the scattered logs, in order to rekindle the fire.

As there was no lack of provisions, they had no occasion to draw on their own private resources; several buffalos that lay lifeless on the ground offered them the most succulent meal known in the desert.

While Tranquil was engaged in getting a buffalo-hump ready, the black and red-skins examined each other with a surprised curiosity.

The negro laughed like a maniac on remarking the strange appearance of the Indian warrior, whose face was painted of four different colours, and who wore so strange a costume; for that worthy, as he himself said, had never before seen an Indian.

The other manifested his astonishment in a different way: after standing for a long time watching the negro, he walked up to him, and not uttering a word, seized

Quoniam's arm, and began rubbing it with all his strength with the skirt of his buffalo-robe.

The negro, who at the outset readily indulged the Indian's whims, soon began to grow impatient; he tried at first to liberate himself, but was unable to succeed, for the chief held him firmly, and conscientiously went on with his singular operation. In the meanwhile, the negro, whom this continued rubbing was beginning not merely to annoy, but cause terrible suffering, began uttering frequent yells while making the most tremendous efforts to escape from his pitiless torturer.

Tranquil's attention was aroused by Quoniam's cries; he threw up his head smartly, and ran up at full speed to deliver the negro, who was rolling his eyes in terror.

"Why does my brother torture that man so?" the Canadian asked as he interposed.

"I?" said the chief, "I am not torturing him; but as his disguise is not necessary, so I am removing it."

"What! my disguise?" Quoniam shouted.

Tranquil made him a sign to be silent.

"This man is not disguised," he continued.

"Why has he painted all his body in this way?" the chief asked; "warriors only paint their face."

The hunter could not repress a burst of laughter.

"My brother is mistaken," he said, so soon as he recovered his seriousness; "this man belongs to a separate race; the Wacondah has given him a black skin, in the same way as he made my brother's red, and mine white; all the brothers of this man are of his colour; the great Spirit has willed it so, in order that they may not be confused with the red-skin nations and pale-faces; if my brother looks at his buffalo-robe, he will see that not the least bit of black has come off on it."

"Wah!" the Indian said, letting his head sink; "the Wacondah can do everything!"

And he mechanically obeyed the hunter by taking a peep at the tail of his robe, which he had not yet thought of letting go.

"Now," Tranquil went on, "be kind enough to regard this man as a friend, and do to him what you would do, if wanted, for me."

The chief bowed gracefully, and held out his hand to the negro.

"The words of my brother the hunter warble in my ears with the sweetness of the *cenizonbee*," he said. "Black-deer is a sachem of his nation, his tongue is not forked, and the words his chest breathes are clear, for they come from his heart; Black-face will have his place at the council fire of the Pawnees, for from this moment he is the friend of a chief."

Quoniam bowed to the Indian, and warmly returned the pressure of his hand.

"I am only a poor black," he said, "but my heart is pure, and the blood is as red in my veins as if I were Indian or white."

After this mutual exchange of assurances of friendship, the three men sat down to breakfast.

Owing to the excitement of the morning, the three adventurers had a ferocious appetite; they did honour to the buffalo-hump, which disappeared almost entirely, and was washed down with a few horns of water mixed with rum, of which liquor Tranquil had a small stock in a gourd, hanging from his waist-belt.

When the meal was ended, pipes were lighted, and each began smoking, silently.

When the chief's pipe was ended, he shook out the ashes on his left thumb-nail, passed the stem through his belt, and turned to Tranquil.

"Will my brothers hold a council?" he asked.

"Yes," the Canadian answered: "when I left you on the Upper Missouri, at the end of the moon of the burned fruit (July), you gave me the meeting at the creek of the dead oaks of the Elk river, on the tenth day of the moon of the falling leaves (September), two hours before sunrise: both of us were punctual, and I am now waiting till it please you to explain to me, chief, why you gave me this meeting."

"My brother is correct; Black-deer will speak."

After uttering these words, the Indian's face seemed to grow dark, and he fell into a profound reverie, which his comrades respected by patiently waiting.

At length, after about a quarter of an hour, the Indian chief passed his hand over his brow several times, raised his head, took a searching glance around, and made up his mind to speak, though in a low and restrained voice, as if, even on the desert, he feared lest his words might fall on hostile ears.

"My brother the hunter has known me since childhood," he said, "for he was brought up by the sachems of my nation: hence I will say nothing of myself. The great pale-face hunter has an Indian heart in his breast; Black-deer will speak to him as a brother to a brother. Three moons ago, the chief was following with his friend the elks and the deer on the prairies of the Missouri, when a Pawnee warrior arrived at full speed, took the chief aside, and spoke with him privately for long hours; does my brother remember this?"

"Perfectly, chief; I remember that after the conversation Blue-fox—for that was the name of the chief—set off as rapidly as he had come, and my brother, who till then had been gay and cheerful, became suddenly sad. In spite of the questions I addressed to my brother, he could not tell me the cause of this sudden grief."

"Yes," the Indian said, "that is exact. But what I could not then tell, I will now impart."

"My ears are open," the hunter replied; "I fear my brother has only bad news to tell."

"My brother shall judge," he said. "This is what Blue-fox came to tell me. One day a pale-face of the Long Knives of the West arrived on the banks of Elk river, where stood the village of the Snake Pawnees, followed by some thirty warriors of the pale-faces, several women, and large medicine lodges, drawn by buffalos without humps or manes. This pale-face halted two arrow-shots' lengths from the village of my nation, on the opposite bank, lit his fires, and camped. My father, as my brother knows, was the first sachem of the tribe. He mounted his horse and, followed by several warriors, crossed the river and presented himself to the stranger, in order to bid him welcome.

"This pale-face was a man of lofty stature, with harsh and marked features. The snow of several winters had whitened his scalp. He began laughing at my father's words, and replied to him—'Are you the chief of the red-skins of this village?' 'Yes,' said my father. Then the pale-face took from his clothes a great necklace, on which strange figures were drawn, and, showing it to my father, said, 'Your pale grandfather of the United States has given me the property in all the land stretching from Antelope's Fall to Buffalo Lake. This,' he added, 'proves my title.'

"My father and the warriors who accompanied him burst into a laugh.

"Our pale grandfather," he answered, "cannot give what does not belong to him. The land of which you speak has been the hunting-ground of my nation ever since the great tortoise came out of the sea."

"I do not understand what you say," the pale-face continued. "I only know that this land is mine; and that if you do not consent to withdraw and leave me to the full enjoyment of it, I shall compel you."

"Yes," Tranquil interrupted, "such is the system of those men—murder and rapine."

"My father retired," the Indian continued, "under this threat. The warriors im-

mediately took up arms, the women were hidden in a cave, and the tribe prepared for resistance. The next morning, at daybreak, the pale-faces crossed the river and attacked the village. The fight was long and obstinate. It lasted the whole period contained between two suns. But what could poor Indians do against pale-faces armed with rifles? They were conquered and forced to take to flight. Two hours later their village was reduced to ashes. My father was killed in the battle."

"Oh!" the Canadian exclaimed, sadly.

"That is not all," the chief went on. "The pale-faces discovered the cave where the women of my tribe were sheltered; and nearly all—for about a dozen contrived to escape with their papooses—were coldly massacred."

After uttering these words, the chief hid his head on his buffalo-robe, but his comrades heard his sobs.

"Such," he went on a moment later, "was the news Blue-fox communicated to me. My father died in his arms, leaving his vengeance as my inheritance. My brothers, pursued like wild beasts by their ferocious enemies, and compelled to hide themselves in the most impenetrable forests, had elected me as chief. I accepted, making the warriors of my nation swear to avenge themselves on the pale-faces. Since our parting, I have not lost a moment in collecting all the means of revenge. To-day all is ready. The pale-faces have gone to sleep, and their awakening shall be terrible. Will my brother follow me?"

"Yes, by Heaven! I will follow you, chief, and help you with all my ability," Tranquil answered, resolutely, "for your cause is just; but on one condition."

"My brother can speak."

"The law of the desert says, 'Eye for eye and tooth for tooth,' it is true; but you can avenge yourself without dishonouring your victory by useless barbarity. Do not follow the example given you, but be humane, chief."

"Black-deer is not cruel," the chief answered. "He leaves that to the pale-faces. he only wishes to be just."

"What you say is noble, chief; and I am happy to hear you speak thus; but are your measures well taken? Is your force large enough to ensure success? You know that the pale-faces are numerous, and never allow one aggressor to pass unpunished."

"The Long Knives of the West are cowardly dogs and rabbits. The squaws of the Pawnees will make them petticoats," he answered. "Black-deer will go with his tribe to settle on the great prairies of the Comanches, who will receive them as brothers, and the pale-faces of the West will not find them."

"That is a good idea, chief; but, since you have been driven from your village, have you not kept spies round the Americans, in order to be informed of their actions?"

Black-deer smiled, but made no other answer, whence the Canadian concluded that the red-skin had, with the sagacity and prudence which characterise his race, taken all the necessary precautions.

Tranquil, owing to his semi-Indian education, and the hereditary hatred which, as a Canadian, he bore to the Anglo-Saxon race, was perfectly well inclined to help the Pawnee chief in taking an exemplary vengeance on the Americans for the insults he had received at their hands; but with the correctness of judgment which formed the basis of his character, he did not wish to let the Indians indulge in those atrocious cruelties to which they only too often yield. Hence the determination he formed had a double object—in the first place, to insure as far as he could the success of his friends, and, secondly, to employ all the influence he possessed over them, to restrain them after the battle.

As we have seen, he did not attempt to conceal his object from Black-deer, and laid down as the first condition of his co-operation that no unnecessary cruelty should be committed.

Quoniam did not make any stipulation; a natural enemy of the whites, and specially of the North Americans, he eagerly seized the occasion of dealing them as much injury as possible, and avenging himself for the ill treatment he had experienced, without taking the trouble to reflect that the people he was about to fight were innocent; they were North Americans, and that reason was more than sufficient to justify, in the sight of the negro, the conduct he proposed to carry out when the moment arrived.

After a few minutes the Canadian spoke again.

"Where are your warriors?" he asked the chief.

"I left them three suns' march from the spot where we now are; if my brother has nothing to keep him longer here, we will set out immediately, for my return is impatiently expected by the warriors."

"Let us go," the Canadian said; "the day is not yet far advanced, and it is needless for us to waste our time in chattering like curious old women."

The three men rose, drew on their belts, walked hastily along the path formed by the manada through the forest, and soon disappeared under its covert.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CLAIM.

WE will now leave our three travellers for a while, and transfer the scene of our story a few hundred miles away, to a rich and verdant valley of the Upper Missouri, that majestic river, with its bright and limpid waters, on the banks of which now stand so many flourishing towns and villages, and which magnificent steamboats furrow in every direction, but which, at the period when our story opens, was almost unknown, and only reflected in the mirror of its waters the lofty and thick frondage of the gloomy and mysterious virgin forests that covered its banks.

At the extremity of a fork, formed by two large affluents, stretches out a valley, bordered on one side by abrupt mountains, on the other by a long line of wooded hills.

This valley, almost entirely covered with thick forests, full of game of every description, was a favourite gathering-place of the Pawnee Indians, a numerous tribe of whom, the Snakes, had established their abode in the angle of the fork, in order to be nearer their hunting-grounds. The Indian village was large, for it counted nearly three hundred and fifty fires, which is enormous for red-skins, who usually do not like to collect in any considerable number, through fear of famine. But the position of the village was so well chosen, that in this instance the Indians had gone out of their usual course; in fact, on one side the forest supplied them with more game than they could consume; on the other, the river abounded with deliciously-tasted fish of every description; while the surrounding prairies were covered throughout the year with a tall close grass, that supplied excellent pasturage for their horses.

For several centuries the Snake Pawnees had been settled in this happy valley, which, owing to its sheltered position on all sides, enjoyed a soft climate, exempt from those great atmospheric perturbations which so frequently disturb the high American latitudes. The Indians lived there quiet and unknown, occupying themselves with hunting and fishing, and sending annually small bodies of their young men to follow the war-trail, under the most renowned chiefs of the nation.

All at once this peaceful existence was hopelessly disturbed; murder and arson

spread like a sinister winding-sheet over the valley ; the village was utterly destroyed, and the inhabitants were pitilessly massacred.

The North Americans had at length gained knowledge of this unknown Eden, and, in their usual way, announced their presence on this remote nook of earth, and their taking possession of it, by theft, rapine, and assassination.

Hardly had they become uncontested owners of the soil, than they commenced what is called a clearing.

The government of the United States had, about forty years ago, a habit of requiring the services of old officers, by making them concessions of land on those frontiers of the Republic most threatened by the Indians. This custom had the double advantage of gradually extending the limits of the American territory by driving back the Indians into the desert, and of not abandoning in their old days soldiers who during the greater portion of their life had shed their blood nobly for their country.

Captain James Watt was the son of an officer who distinguished himself in the war of Independence. Colonel Lionel Watt had fought by the side of Washington in all the battles against the English. Seriously wounded at the siege of Boston, he had been, to his great regret, compelled to retire into private life ; but, faithful to his principles, so soon as his son James reached his twentieth year, he made him take his place under the flag.

At the period when we bring him on the scene, James Watt was a man of about five-and-forty, although he appeared at least ten years older, owing to the incessant fatigue of his profession.

He was a man of five feet eight, powerfully built, with broad shoulders, dry, muscular, and endowed with an iron constitution ; his face, whose lines were extremely rigid, was imprinted with that expression of energetic will, blended with carelessness, which is peculiar to those men whose existence has been only one continual succession of dangers. His short grey hair, his bronzed complexion, black and piercing eyes, his well-chiselled mouth, gave his face an expression of inflexible severity.

Captain Watt, who had been only married three years past to a charming young lady, was father of two children, a son and daughter.

His wife, Fanny by name, was a distant relation of his. She was a brunette, with exquisite blue eyes, and was most gentle and modest. Although much younger than her husband, for she was not yet two-and-twenty, Fanny felt for him the deepest and sincerest affection.

When the old soldier found himself a father, and began to experience the joys of a family life, a change took place in him ; he suddenly took a disgust to his profession, and desired the tranquil joys of home.

James Watt was one of those men with whom it is only one step from the conception to the execution of a plan. Hence, no sooner had the idea of retiring from the service occurred to him than he carried it out.

Still, although the captain was inclined to retire into private life, he did not mean to put off military harness and assume a citizen's coat. The monotonous life of Union towns had nothing very seductive for an old soldier, for whom excitement and movement had been the normal condition almost from his birth.

Consequently, after ripe reflection, he stopped half way, which, in his opinion, would remedy the excessive simplicity and peace a citizen life might have for him.

This was to be effected by asking for a claim on the Indian border, clearing it with the help of his servants, and living there happy and busy, like a mediæval lord among his vassals.

This idea pleased the captain the more, because he fancied that in this way he should still be serving his country, as he would lay the foundation of future prosperity.

The captain had long been engaged with his company in defending the frontier of the Union against the incessant depredations of the red-skins ; hence he had a superficial knowledge of Indian manners, and the means he must employ not to be disturbed by these restless neighbours.

During the course of the numerous expeditions which the service had compelled him to make, the captain had visited many fertile valleys, and many territories, the appearance of which had pleased him ; but there was one above all, the memory of which had been obstinately engraved on his mind—a delicious valley he had seen one day as in a dream, after a hunting expedition, made in company of a wood-ranger—an excursion which lasted three weeks, and had insensibly taken him further into the desert than ever civilised man had gone before.

Though he had not seen this valley for more than twenty years, he remembered it as if it were but yesterday—recalling it in its minutest details. And this obstinacy of his memory in constantly bringing before him this nook of earth had ended by affecting the captain's imagination to such a degree, that when he resolved to leave the service and ask for a claim, it was to this place and no other that he was determined to go.

James Watt had numerous friends in office ; besides, the services of his father and himself spoke loudly in his favour : hence he experienced no difficulty in obtaining the claim he requested.

Several plans were shown him, drawn up by order of government, and he was invited to select the territory that suited him best.

But the captain had chosen the one he wanted long before ; he rejected the plans shown him, produced from his pocket a wide slip of tanned elk-hide, unrolled it, and showed it to the commissioner of claims, telling him he wanted this, and no other.

The commissioner was a friend of the captain, and could not refrain from a start of terror.

This claim was situated in the heart of the Indian territory, more than four hundred miles from the American border. The captain wished to commit an act of suicide ; it would be impossible for him to hold his own among the warlike tribes that would surround him ; a month would not elapse ere he would be piteously massacred, as must be his family and those servants who were mad enough to follow him.

To all these objections, which his friend piled up one on the other, to make him change his opinion, the captain only replied by a shake of the head, accompanied by a smile, which proved that his mind was made up.

At length, the commissioner being driven into his last intrenchments, told him point-blank that it was impossible to grant him this claim, as the territory belonged to the Indians, and, moreover, a tribe had built its village there since time immemorial.

The commissioner had kept this argument to the last, feeling convinced that the captain could find no answer.

He was mistaken ; the commissioner was not so well acquainted with his friend's character as he fancied.

The latter, not at all affected by the triumphant gesture with which the commissioner concluded his speech, coolly drew from another pocket a second slip of tanned deer-hide, which he handed his friend.

The latter took it with an inquiring glance, but the captain merely nodded to him to look at it.

The commissioner unrolled it with marked hesitation ; from the old soldier's behaviour he suspected that this document contained a peremptory answer.

In fact, he had scarce looked at it, ere he threw it on the table with a violent movement of ill-humour.

This slip of deer-skin contained the sale of the valley and the surrounding territory made by Itsichaiche, or Monkey-face, one of the principal sachems of the Snake Pawnees, in his name and that of the other chiefs of the nation, in exchange for fifty muskets, fourteen dozen scalping-knives, sixty pounds of gunpowder, sixty pounds of bullets, two barrels of whisky, and twenty-three complete militia uniforms.

Each of the chiefs had placed his hieroglyphic at the foot of the deed, beneath that of Monkey-face.

We will say at once that this deed was false, and the captain in the affair was the perfect dupe of Monkey-face.

This chief, who had been expelled from the tribe of Snake Pawnees for various causes, forged the deed, first to rob the captain, and next to avenge himself on his countrymen; for he knew perfectly well that if the captain received authority from his government he would seize the valley, whatever the consequences of this spoliation might be.

When the deed of sale was laid before him, the commissioner was forced to confess himself beaten, and grant the authority so obstinately solicited by the captain.

When all the documents were duly registered, signed, and sealed, the captain began his preparations for departure without further delay.

Mrs. Watt loved her husband too well to offer any objections. Brought up herself on a clearing at no great distance from the Indian border, she had become familiarised with the savages, whom the habit of constantly seeing caused her no longer to fear; besides, she cared little where she lived, so long as she had her husband by her side.

Quite calm as regarded his wife, the captain therefore set to work with all that feverish activity which distinguished him.

The captain did not deceive himself as to the probable consequences of the resolution he had formed; hence he wished to guard against any eventualities, and ensure the security of the persons who would accompany him, the first among these being his wife and children.

His selection, however, did not take him long: among his old comrades many wished for nothing better than to follow him, at the head of them being an old sergeant of the name of Walter Bothrel, who had served under him for more than fifteen years, and who, at the first news of his chief's retirement, went to him, and said that as his captain was leaving the service, he did not care to remain in it.

Bothrel's offer was gladly accepted by the captain, for he knew the value of the sergeant, who was a sort of bull-dog for fidelity, and a man of tried courage.

To the sergeant Captain Watt entrusted the duty of enrolling the detachment of hunters he intended to take with him, in order to defend the new colony.

Bothrel carried out his instructions with the intelligence he displayed in all matters, and he soon found in the captain's own company thirty resolute men, only too glad to follow the fortunes of their ex-chief.

On his side, the captain had engaged some fifteen workmen of every description, blacksmiths, carpenters, &c., who signed an undertaking to serve five years, after which they would become tenants, at a small rental, of farms the captain would let them, and which would become their own property on the expiration of a further term.

All the preparations being at length terminated, the colonists, amounting to fifty men, and about a dozen females, at length set out for the claim in the middle of May, taking with them a long caravan of waggons loaded with stores of every description, and a large herd of cattle.

Monkey-face acted as guide. To do the Indian justice, we will say that he con-

scientiously performed the duty he undertook ; and that during a journey of nearly three months across a desert infested by wild beasts and traversed in every direction by Indian hordes, he managed to save those he led from the dangers that menaced them at each step.

CHAPTER VII.

MONKEY-FACE.

WE have seen in what way the captain seized on the territory conceded to him. We will now explain how he established himself there, and the precautions he took not to be disturbed by the Indians he had dispossessed, and who, he judged from his knowledge of their vindictive character, would probably not yet consider themselves beaten, but might begin at any moment the attempt to take a sanguinary and terrible vengeance.

The fight with the Indians had been rude and obstinate, but, thanks to Monkey-face, who revealed to the captain the weakest points of the village, and especially the superiority of the American fire-arms, the Indians were at length compelled to take to flight, and abandon all they possess to the conquerors.

It was a wretched booty, consisting only of animal skins and a few vessels made of clay.

The captain, no sooner master of the place, began his work, and laid the foundation stone of the new colony ; for he understood the necessity of protecting himself as quickly as possible against a *coup-de-main*.

The site of the village was completely freed from the ruins that encumbered it ; the labourers then began levelling the ground, and digging a ditch six yards wide and four deep, which was connected on one side by means of a cutting with the affluent of the Missouri, on the other with the river itself ; behind this ditch, and on the wall formed of the earth dug out of it, a line of stakes was planted, twelve feet high, and fastened together by iron bands, almost invisible interstices being left, through which a rifle barrel could be thrust and discharged under covert. In this intrenchment a gate was made large enough for a waggon to pass, with a drawbridge, which was pulled up at sunset.

These preliminary precautions taken, an extent of about four thousand square yards was thus surrounded by water, and defended by palisades on all sides, excepting on the face turned to the Missouri, for the width and depth of that river afforded a sufficient guarantee of security.

It was in the free space to which we have just alluded, that the captain began building the houses.

At the outset these buildings were to be made of wood, that is to say, of trees with the bark left on them ; and there was no lack of wood, for the forest was scarce a hundred yards from the colony.

The works were pushed on with such activity, that two months after the captain's arrival at the spot all the buildings were finished, and the interior arrangements almost completed.

In the centre of the colony, on an elevation made for the purpose, a species of octagonal tower, about seventy feet in height, was erected, of which the roof was flat, and which was divided into three storeys. At the bottom were the kitchen and offices, while the upper rooms were allotted to the members of the family, that is to say, the captain and his lady ; the two nursemaids, young and hearty Kentuckians, with rosy

and plump cheeks, called Betsy and Emma ; Mistress Margaret, the cook, a respectable matron entering on her ninth lustre, though she only confessed to five-and-thirty, and still had some pretence to beauty, and, lastly, to Sergeant Bothrel. This tower was closed with a stout iron-lined door, and in the centre was a wicket to reconnoitre visitors.

About ten yards from the tower, and communicating with it by a subterraneous passage, were the log huts of the hunters, the workmen, the neatherds, and labourers.

After these again came the stables and cowhouses.

In addition, scattered here and there, were large barns and granaries, for the produce of the colony.

But all these different buildings were arranged so as to be isolated, and so far from each other, that in the event of fire, the loss of one building need not absolutely entail that of the rest ; several wells were also dug at regular distances, so as to have abundance of water.

In a word we may say that the captain, accustomed to all the tricks of border warfare, had taken the minutest precautions to avoid not merely an attack, but a surprise.

Three months had elapsed since the settlement of the Americans ; this valley, hitherto uncultivated, and covered with forests, was now in great part ploughed up ; clearings effected on a large scale had removed the forest more than a mile from the colony ; all offered the image of prosperity and comfort at a spot where, so shortly before, the carelessness of the red-skins allowed nature to produce at liberty the small stock of fodder needed for their beasts.

Inside the colony, all offered the most lively and busy sight ; while outside, the cattle pastured under the care of mounted and well-armed herds, and the trees fell beneath the blows of the axemen ; inside, all the workshops were in full activity, long columns of smoke rose from the forges, the noise of hammers was mingled with the whirring of the saw ; on the river bank, enormous piles of planks stood near others composed of fire-wood ; several boats were tied up, and from time to time the shots of the hunters could be heard, who were carrying out a battue in the woods in order to stock the colony with deer-meat.

It was about four in the afternoon, and the captain, mounted on a magnificent black horse, with four white stockings, was ambling across a freshly-cleared prairie.

A smile of quiet satisfaction played over the old soldier's stern face at the sight of the change his will and feverish activity had effected in so short a time on this unknown corner of earth, which must, however, in no remote future, acquire a great commercial importance, owing to its position ; when a man, hitherto hidden behind a pile of roots and bushes heaped up to dry, suddenly appeared at his side.

The captain repressed a start of anger on perceiving this man, in whom he recognised Monkey-face.

Itsichaiché was a man of forty, tall, and well-proportioned ; he had a crafty face, lit up by two little gimlet eyes ; his vulture-beaked nose, his wide mouth, with its thin and retiring lips, gave him a cunning and ugly look, which, in spite of the cautious and cat-like obsequiousness of his manner, and the calculated softness of his voice, inspired those whom accident brought in contact with him with a repugnance which nothing could overcome.

Contrary to the usual state of things, the habit of seeing him, instead of diminishing, and causing this unpleasant feeling to disappear, only increased it.

He had conscientiously and honestly performed his contract in leading the Americans to the spot they wished to reach ; but, since that period, he had remained with them, and had foisted himself on the colony, where he came and went as he pleased.

At times he would disappear for several days, then suddenly return, and it was im-

possible to obtain any information from him as to where he had been and what he had been doing.

Still, there was one person to whom the Indian's face constantly caused a vague terror, and who had been unable to overcome the repulsion with which he inspired her, although she could give no explanation of the feeling: this person was Mrs. Watt. Maternal love produces clear-sightedness; the young lady adored her children, and when at times the red-skin by chance let a careless glance fall on the innocent creatures, the poor mother shivered, and hastily withdrew from the sight of the man the two beings who were all in all to her.

At times she tried to make her husband share her fears, but to all her remarks the captain merely replied by a significant shrug of his shoulders, supposing that with time this feeling would wear off and disappear. Still, as Mrs. Watt constantly returned to the charge with the obstinacy and perseverance of a person whose ideas cannot change, the captain, who had no cause or plausible reason to defend against the wife he loved and respected, a man for whom he did not profess the slightest esteem, at length promised to get rid of him. As the Indian had been absent from the colony for several days, he determined immediately on his return to ask for an explanation of his mysterious conduct, and if the other did not reply in a plain and satisfactory manner, to tell him that he would not have him any longer about the settlement.

Such was the state of the captain's feelings when accident brought him across his path.

On seeing the Indian, the captain checked his horse.

"Is my father visiting the valley?" the Pawnee asked.

"Yes," was the answer.

"Oh!" the Indian went on as he looked around him, "all has greatly changed since the beasts of the Long Knives have been grazing peacefully on the territories of which they dispossessed the Snake Pawnees."

The Indian uttered these words in a sad voice, which caused the captain some anxiety.

"Is that a regret you are giving vent to, chief?" he asked him. "If so, it seems to me very strange from your lips, since it was you who sold me the territory."

"That is true," the Indian said. "Monkey-face has no right to complain, for it was he who sold to the pale-faces of the West the ground where his fathers repose, and where he and his brothers so often hunted the elk and the jaguar."

"Hum, chief, I find you very sad to-day; what is the matter with you? Did you, on waking this morning, find yourself lying on your left side?" alluding to one of the superstitions of the Indians.

"No," he continued, "the sleep of Monkey-face was exempt from all evil omens."

"I congratulate you, chief."

"My father will give tobacco to his son, in order that he may smoke the calumet of friendship on his return."

"Perhaps so, but first I have a question to ask."

"My father can speak, his son's ears are open."

"It is now a long time, chief," the captain continued, "since we have been established here."

"Yes, the fourth moon is beginning."

"Since our arrival, you have left us a great many times without warning us."

"Why should I do so? Air and space do not belong to the pale-faces, I suppose; the Pawnee warrior is at liberty to go where he thinks proper."

"All that may be true, chief, and I do not care about it; but what I do care about is the safety of my family and the men who accompanied me here."

"Well," the red-skin said, "in what way can Monkey-face injure that safety?"

"I will tell you, chief; listen to me attentively."

"Monkey-face is only a poor Indian," the red-skin answered, ironically; "the Great Spirit has not given him the clear and subtle mind of the pale-faces."

"You are not so simple as you choose to appear, chief; I am certain you will perfectly understand me."

"The chief will try."

The captain repressed a movement of impatience.

"We are not here in one of the cities of America, where the law protects the citizens and guarantees their safety; we are on the red-skin territory, far from any other protection than our own; we have no help to expect from any one, and are surrounded by vigilantes and enemies watching a favourable moment to attack us. It is, therefore, our duty to watch over our own safety with the utmost vigilance, for the slightest imprudence would gravely compromise us. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, my father has spoken well; his head is grey; his wisdom is great."

"I must therefore carefully watch," the captain continued, "the movements of all the persons who belong to the colony; and when their movements appear to me suspicious, I will ask those explanations which they have no right to refuse me. Now, I am compelled to confess to you, chief, that the life you have been leading for some time past seems to me more than suspicious. It has, therefore, attracted my attention, and I expect a satisfactory answer from you."

The red-skin had stood unmoved; not a muscle of his face moved; and the captain, who watched him closely, could not notice the slightest trace of emotion on his features.

"Monkey-face led my father from the great stone villages of the Long Knives of the West to the spot. Has my father any cause to reproach the chief?"

"None, I am bound to allow," the captain answered, frankly; "you did your duty honestly."

"Why, then, does a skin cover my father's heart? and why has suspicion crept into his mind about a man against whom he has not the slightest reproach to bring?"

"Let us not drift from the question, chief. I could not follow you through all your Indian circumlocution; I will, therefore, confine myself to saying that, unless you consent to tell me frankly the cause of your repeated absences, and give me assured proof of your innocence, I will have you turned out of the colony."

A gleam of hatred flashed from the red-skin's eyes; but he immediately replied, in his softest voice—

"Monkey-face is a poor Indian; his brothers have rejected him on account of his friendship with the pale-faces. He hoped to find among them, in the absence of friendship, gratitude for services. He is mistaken."

"That is not the question," the captain continued impatiently; "will you answer, yes or no?"

The Indian drew himself in, and walked up to the speaker close enough to touch him.

"And if I refuse?" he said.

"If you refuse, scoundrel! I forbid you ever again appearing before me; and if you disobey me, I will chastise you with my dog-whip!"

The captain had hardly uttered these insulting words ere he repented of them. He was alone, and unarmed, with a man whom he had mortally insulted.

"But Monkey-face," he went on, "is a chief; he is wise; he will answer me—for he knows that I love him."

"You lie, dog of the pale-faces!" the Indian yelled; "you hate me almost as I hate you!"

The captain, in his exasperation, raised his switch; but the Indian, with a panther leap, bounded on his horse's croup, dragged the captain out of his stirrups, and rudely hurled him to the ground.

"The pale-faces are cowardly old women," he said; "the Pawnee warriors will send them petticoats."

After uttering these words with a sarcastic accent impossible to describe, the Indian bent over the horse's neck, let loose the rein, uttered a fierce yell, and started at full speed, not troubling himself further about the captain, whom he left severely bruised by his fall.

James Watt was not the man to endure such treatment without trying to revenge himself; he got up as quickly as he could, and shouted, in order to get together the hunters and wood-cutters scattered over the plain.

Some of them had seen what had happened, and started at full speed to help their captain; but before they reached him, and he could give his orders to pursue the fugitive, the latter had disappeared in the heart of the forest, towards which he had directed his rapid advance.

The hunters, however, headed by Sergeant Bothrel, rushed in pursuit of the Indian, swearing they would bring him in either dead or alive.

The captain looked after them till he saw them disappear one after the other in the forest, and then returned slowly to the colony, reflecting on what had taken place between himself and the red-skin, and his heart contracted by a gloomy presentiment.

Something whispered to him that, for Monkey-face to have acted as he had done, he must have fancied himself very strong, and quite certain of impunity.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DECLARATION OF WAR.

THERE is an incomprehensible fact, which we were many times in a position to appreciate during the adventurous course of our wanderings in America—that a man will at times feel the approach of a misfortune, though unable to account for the feelings he suffers from; he knows that he is menaced, though unable to tell whence the peril will come; the day seems to grow more gloomy, the sunbeams lose their brilliancy, external objects assume a mournful appearance; there are strange murmurs in the air; all, in a word, seems to feel the impression of a vague and undefined restlessness.

Though nothing occurred to justify the captain's fears after his altercation with the Pawnee, not only he, but the whole population of the colony felt under the weight of dull terror on the evening of this day.

At six o'clock the bell was rung to recall the wood-cutters and herds; all had returned, the beasts were shut up in their respective stalls, and, apparently, nothing out of the common troubled the calm existence of the colonists.

Sergeant Bothrel and his comrades, who had pursued Monkey-face for several hours, had only found the horse the Indian so audaciously carried off.

Although no Indian sign was visible in the vicinity, the captain, more anxious than he wished to appear, had doubled the sentries, and ordered the sergeant to patrol every two hours.

When all these precautions had been taken, the family and servants assembled on the ground floor of the tower to spend the evening, as was their wont.

The captain, sitting in an easy chair by the fire, was reading an old work on

military tactics, while Mrs. Watt, with the servants, was engaged in mending the household linen.

This evening, however, the captain, instead of reading, seemed to be thinking profoundly.

At last he raised his head, and turned to his wife—

“Do you not hear the children crying?” he said.

“I do not know what is the matter with them to-day,” she answered. “Betsy has been with them for more than an hour, and has not been able to get them to sleep.”

“You should go yourself, my dear; that would be more proper than leaving these things to the care of a servant.”

Mrs. Watt went out without answering, and her voice could soon be heard on the upper floor.

“So, sergeant,” the captain went on, addressing the old soldier, who was busy in a corner, “you found it impossible to catch up that accursed heathen?”

“We could not even see him, captain,” the sergeant replied: “these Indians are like lizards, they slip through anywhere. Luckily I found Boston again; the poor brute seemed delighted at seeing me again.”

“Yes, yes. Boston is a noble brute; I should have been vexed to lose him. The heathen has not wounded him, I hope.”

“There is nothing the matter with him as far as I can see; the Indian was probably compelled to leap off his back in a hurry upon finding us so close to his heels.”

“It must be so, sergeant. Have you examined the neighbourhood carefully?”

“With the greatest attention, captain, but I noticed nothing suspicious. The redskins will look twice before attacking us; we gave them too rude a shaking for them to forget it.”

“I am not of your opinion, sergeant; the pagans are vindictive; I am convinced that they would like to avenge themselves on us, and that some day we shall have them utter their war-yell in the valley.”

“I do not desire it, it is true; but I believe, if they attempted it, they would sing small.”

“I think so too; but they would give us a sorrowful surprise, especially now that, through our labours and our care, we are on the point of receiving the price of our fatigues.”

“That is true, for the losses an attack from these bandits would entail on us are incalculable.”

“Unluckily, we can only keep on our guard, and it will be impossible for us to foil the plans which these red demons are doubtless ruminating against us. Have you placed the sentinels as I recommended, sergeant?”

“Yes, captain, and I ordered them to display the utmost watchfulness; I do not believe that the Pawnees can surprise us, however clever they may be.”

“We cannot take our oath of anything, sergeant,” the captain answered, as he shook his head.

At this moment, and as if accident wished to confirm his views, the bell outside, used to tell the colonists some one desired to come in, was rung violently.

“What does that mean?” the captain exclaimed, as he looked at a clock on the wall, in front of him; “it is nearly eight o’clock; who can come so late? have not all our men returned?”

“All, captain; there is no one outside the palisades.”

James Watt rose, seized his rifle, and making the sergeant a sign to follow him, prepared to go out.

“Where are you going, my love?” a gentle, anxious voice asked him.

The captain turned; his wife had re-entered the room unnoticed by him.

"Did you not hear the bell?" he asked her; "some one wishes to come in."

"Yes, I heard it, dear," she replied; "but do you intend to open the gate at this hour?"

"I am the head of this colony, madam," the captain answered, coldly but firmly; "and at such an hour as this it is my duty to open the gate, for there may be danger in doing it."

At this moment the bell pealed a second time.

"Let us go," said the captain.

His wife made no reply. She fell into a chair, pale and trembling with anxiety.

In the meanwhile the captain had gone out, followed by Bothrel and four hunters, all armed with rifles.

The night was dark. There was not a star in the heavens, which were black as ink. Two paces ahead it was impossible to distinguish objects, and a cold breeze whistled fitfully.

"How is it," the captain said, "that the sentry at the drawbridge has not challenged?"

"Perhaps he is afraid of giving an alarm, knowing, as he did, that we should hear the bell from the tower."

"Hum!" the captain murmured between his teeth.

They walked onward. Presently they heard a sound of voices, to which they listened.

"Patience!" said the sentry. "Some one is coming. I see a lanthorn shining. You will only have a few moments longer to wait, though for your own sake I recommend you not to stir, or I shall put a bullet into you."

"Hang it!" a sarcastic voice replied outside, "you have a curious idea of hospitality. No matter, I will wait; so you can raise your barrel, for I have no idea of carrying your works by myself."

"What is it, Bob?" asked the captain.

"I really don't know, captain," he answered. "There is a man on the edge of the ditch who insists on coming in."

"Who are you? What do you want?" the captain shouted.

"And pray who may you be?" the stranger replied.

"I am Captain James Watt, and I warn you that unknown vagabonds are not allowed to enter here at such an hour. Return at sunrise."

"Take care what you are about," the stranger said. "Your obstinacy in causing me to shiver on the brink of this ditch may cost you dearly."

"Take care yourself," the captain answered, impatiently. "I am not in the mood to listen to threats."

"I do not threaten: I warn you. You have already committed a grave fault today. Do not commit a grave one to-night."

This answer struck the captain, and made him reflect.

"Supposing," he said, "I allow you to enter, who guarantees that you will not betray me? The night is dark, and you may have a large band with you."

"I have only one companion with me, for whom I answer with my head."

"Hum!" the captain remarked, more undecided than ever, "and who will answer for you?"

"Myself."

"Who are you, as you speak our language with such correctness that you might almost be taken for one of our countrymen?"

"Well, I am nearly one; for I am a Canadian, and my name is Tranquil."

"Tranquil!" the captain exclaimed, "Are you, then, the celebrated wood-range-surnamed the Panther-killer?"

"I do not know whether I am celebrated. All I am certain of is, that I am the man you refer to."

"If you are really Tranquil, I will allow you to enter; but who is the man that accompanies you, and for whom you answer?"

"Black-deer, the first sachem of the Snake Pawnees."

"Oh! oh!" the captain muttered, "what does he want here?"

"Let us in, and you will know."

"Well, be it so," the captain shouted; "but I warn you that, at the slightest appearance of treachery, you and your comrade will be mercilessly killed."

"And you will be justified in doing so."

The captain, after recommending his hunters to hold themselves in readiness for any event, ordered the drawbridge to be lowered.

Tranquil and Black-deer entered.

Both were unarmed, or at any rate, seemed so. In the presence of such a proof of confidence, the captain felt ashamed of his suspicions; and after the bridge had been raised again, he dismissed his escort.

"Follow me," he said to the strangers.

The latter bowed without further reply, and walked at his side.

They reached the tower without exchanging a syllable.

The captain introduced them into the room where Mrs. Watt was, a prey to the most lively anxiety.

By a sign her husband ordered her to retire. She gave him a suppliant glance, which he understood, for he did not insist, and she remained silent in her chair.

Tranquil had the same calm and open countenance as of yore. Nothing in his manner seemed to evidence that he had any hostile intentions towards the colonists.

Black-deer, on the contrary, was gloomy and stern. The captain offered his guests seats by the fire.

"Be seated, gentlemen," he said. "You must feel the need of warmth. Have you come to me as friends or foes?"

"It is more easy to ask that question than answer it," the hunter said, honestly; "up to the present our intentions are kindly; you will decide yourself, captain, as to the terms on which we shall leave you."

"In any case, you will not refuse some slight refreshment?"

"For the present, I must ask you to excuse us," Tranquil replied; "it is better, I think, to settle at once the point that brings us here."

"Hum!" the captain muttered, annoyed in his heart at this refusal; "in that case speak, and an amicable interview will not depend on me."

"I wish it with all my heart, captain; the more so, because if I am here it is with the object of avoiding the consequences of a mistake."

The captain bowed his thanks, and the Canadian went on.

"You are an old soldier, sir," he said, "and the shorter the speech the better you will like it; in two words, then, this is what brings us: the Snake Pawnees accuse you of having seized their village by treachery, and massacred the greater part of their relations."

"It is true that I seized their village, but I had the right to do so, since the redskins refused to surrender it to me: but I deny that I acted treacherously: on the contrary, the Pawnees behaved in that way to me."

"Oh!" Black-deer exclaimed, as he rose quickly, "the pale-face has a lying tongue in his mouth."

"Peace!" Tranquil cried, as he forced him to take his seat again; "leave me to disentangle this skein, which seems to me very troublesome. Forgive me for insisting," he went on, addressing the captain, "but the question is a grave one, and the

truth must out. Were you not received, on your arrival, by the chiefs of the tribe, in the light of a friend?"

"Yes; our first relations were amicable."

"Why, then, did they become hostile?"

"I have told you; because, contrary to sworn faith and pledged word, they refused to give up the land."

"What do you say?"

"Certainly, because they had sold me the territory they occupied."

"Oh, oh, captain! this requires an explanation."

"It is very easy to give, and to prove my good faith in the matter, I will show you the deed of sale."

The hunter and the chief exchanged a glance.

"I am quite out of my reckoning," said Tranquil.

"Wait a moment," the captain went on; "I will fetch the deed and show it to you."

And he went out.

"Oh, sir!" the young lady exclaimed, as she clasped her hands entreatingly, "try to prevent a quarrel."

"Alas, madam!" the hunter said sadly, "that will be very difficult, after the turn matters have taken."

"Here, look," the captain said, as he came in and showed them the deed.

The two men required but a glance to detect the trick.

"That deed is false," said Tranquil.

"False! that is impossible!" the captain went on in stupor; "if it be, I am odiously deceived."

"Unfortunately that has happened."

"What is to be done?" the captain muttered.

Black-deer rose.

"Let the pale-faces listen," he said, majestically; "a sachem is about to speak."

The Canadian tried to interpose, but the chief sternly imposed silence on him.

"My father has been deceived; he is a just warrior, his head is grey; the Wacondah has given him wisdom; the Snake Pawnees are also just; they wish to live in peace with my father, because he is innocent of the fault with which he is reproached, and for which another must be rendered responsible."

The commencement of this speech greatly surprised the chief's hearers; the young mother especially, on hearing the words, felt her anxiety disappear.

"The Snake Pawnees," the sachem continued, "will restore to my father all the merchandise he extorted from him; he, for his part, will pledge himself to abandon the hunting-grounds of the Pawnees, and retire with the pale-faces who came with him; the Pawnees will give up the vengeance they wished to take for the murder of their brothers, and the war-hatchet will be buried between the red-skins and the pale faces of the West. I have spoken."

After these words there was a silence.

His hearers were struck with stupor: if the conditions were unacceptable, war became inevitable.

"What does my father answer?" the chief asked.

"Unhappily, chief," the captain answered sadly, "I cannot consent to such conditions: that is impossible; all I can do is to double the price I paid previously."

The chief shrugged his shoulders in contempt.

"Black-deer was mistaken," he said, with a crushing smile of sarcasm; "the pale-faces have really a forked tongue."

It was impossible to make the sachem understand the real state of the case; with that blind obstinacy characteristic of his race, he would listen to nothing; the more

they tried to prove to him that he was wrong, the more convinced he felt he was right.

At a late hour of the night the Canadian and Black-deer withdrew, accompanied, as far as the intrenchments, by the captain.

So soon as they had gone, James Watt returned thoughtfully to the tower; on the threshold he stumbled against a rather large object, and stooped down to see what it was.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "then they mean fighting! By Heaven! they shall have it to their heart's content!"

The object against which the captain had stumbled was a bundle of arrows fastened by a serpent-skin; the two ends of this skin and the points of the arrows were blood-stained.

Black-deer, on retiring, had let the declaration of war fall behind him.

All hope of peace had vanished, and preparation for fighting must be made.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SNAKE PAWNEES.

WE will now clear up a few points in this story which may appear obscure.

The red-skins, however great their other faults may be, have a fanatic love for the country where they are born, and nothing can take its place.

Monkey-face did not speak falsely when he told Captain Watt that he was one of the principal chiefs of his tribe; but he had been careful not to reveal for what reason he had been expelled from his tribe.

Monkey-face was not only a man of unbridled ambition, but also, a strange thing for an Indian, he had no religious faith, and was completely exempt from those weaknesses and that credulity to which his fellows are so amenable: in addition, he was faithless, dishonourable, and of depraved manners.

Having been taken, when young, to the towns of the American Union, he had been in a position to see closely the civilisation of the United States. Unable to comprehend the good and bad sides, and steer between them, he had, as generally happens in such cases, been seduced by that which most flattered his tastes and instincts, and had only taken from the customs of the whites whatever completed his precocious depravity.

Hence, when he returned to his tribe, his language and manners were so discordant with what was done and said around him, that he speedily excited the contempt and hatred of his countrymen.

His most violent enemies were naturally the priests, whom he had tried several times to turn into ridicule.

So soon as Monkey-face had put against him the omnipotent party of the sorcerers, it was all over with his ambitious plans.

For a long time, the chief, not knowing how to act, kept prudently on the defensive, while actively watching the movements of his enemies; awaiting, with that feline patience which formed the basis of his character, for chance to reveal to him the name of the man on whom his vengeance should fall. As all his measures were taken, he soon discovered that the man to whom he owed his continual checks was no other than the principal sorcerer of the tribe.

This was an aged man, respected and beloved by all on account of his wisdom a

goodness. Monkey-face hid his hatred for a season; but one day, in full council, after a lively discussion, he allowed his rage to carry him away, and, rushing on the unhappy old man, he stabbed him in the sight of all the elders of the tribe.

The murder of the sorcerer put the climax on the horror this villain inspired. On the spot, the chief drove him from the territory of the nation, refusing him fire and water, and threatening him with the heaviest punishment if he dared to appear before them again.

Monkey-face, too weak to resist the execution of this sentence, retired with rage in his heart.

We have seen in what way he revenged himself by selling the territory of his tribe to the Americans, and thus causing the ruin of those who banished him. But he had scarce obtained the vengeance he had so long pursued, when a strange revolution occurred in this man's heart. The sight of the land where he was born, and where the ashes of his father reposed, aroused in him with extreme force that love of his country which he thought dead, but was only asleep in his heart.

The shame at the odious action he had committed, by surrendering to the enemies of his race the hunting-grounds which he had himself so long freely traversed, the obstinacy with which the Americans set to work changing the face of the country, and destroying their aged trees, whose shadows had so long protected the councils of his nation—all these causes combined had caused him to reflect, and, rendered desperate by the sacrilege which hatred impelled him to commit, he tried to rejoin his comrades, in order to assist them in recovering what they had lost through his fault.

That is to say, he resolved to betray his new friends to the profit of his old friends.

This man was unhappily engaged in a fatal path, where each step he took was marked for a crime.

It was easier than he at first supposed for him to rejoin his countrymen, for they were scattered and wandering in despair through the forests round the colony.

Monkey-face presented himself boldly to them, and was very careful not to tell them that he alone was the cause of their misfortunes. On the other hand, he made a secret of his return, telling them that the news of the calamities, which had suddenly fallen on them, was the sole cause of his coming.

In a word, he displayed such noble sentiments, and put the step he was taking in such a brilliant light, that he completely succeeded in deceiving the Indians.

After this, with the diabolical intelligence he possessed, he formed a vast plot against the Americans; and, while ostensibly remaining the friend of the colonists, he silently prepared and organised their utter ruin.

The influence he succeeded in obtaining over his tribe within a short time was immense: three men alone entertained an instinctive distrust of him; these were Tranquil, the Canadian hunter, Black-deer, and Blue-fox.

Tranquil could not understand the conduct of the chief; it seemed to him extraordinary that this man had thus become a friend of the Americans. Several times he asked him explanations on this head, but Monkey-face had always answered in an ambiguous way.

Tranquil, whose suspicions grew daily, and who was determined to know positively what opinion to have of a man whose manœuvres appeared to him daily more suspicious, succeeded in getting himself chosen with Black-deer, to bear the declaration of war to Captain Watt.

Monkey-face was vexed at the choice of the envoys whom he knew to be his enemies; but he concealed his resentment; the more so, because matters were too far advanced to withdraw.

Tranquil and Black-deer consequently set out with orders to declare war on the pale-faces.

"If I am not greatly mistaken," the Canadian said, "we are going to hear something about Monkey-face."

"Do you think so?"

"I would wager it. I am convinced the scamp is playing a double game."

"I have no great confidence in him, still I cannot believe that he could carry his effrontery so far."

"We shall soon see what we have to depend on; at any rate, though, promise me that I shall be the first to speak. I know better than you how to deal with the pale-faces."

"Be it so," Black-deer replied; "act as you think proper."

Five minutes after they reached the colony. We have related what passed between them and Captain Watt.

The custom of the Indians of declaring war against their enemies may appear extraordinary to Europeans, who are accustomed to regard them as stupid savages, but the red-skins have an eminently chivalrous character, and never, except in the case of a horse-robbery or such matter, will they attack an enemy before warning him.

When a few yards from the colony, the two men found their horses where they had hobbled them; they mounted, and went off at a rapid rate.

"Well," Tranquil asked the chief, "what do you think of all this?"

"My brother was right: Monkey-face has constantly cheated us."

"What do you intend doing?"

"I do not know yet; perhaps it would be dangerous to unmask him at this moment."

"I am not of your opinion, chief; the presence of this traitor among us can only injure our cause."

"Let us have a look at him first."

"Be it so; but permit me a remark."

"I am listening, my brother."

"How is it that after recognising the falseness of that deed of sale, you insisted on declaring war against this Long-knife of the West, since he has proved to you that he was deceived by Monkey-face?"

The chief smiled cunningly. "The pale-face was only deceived," he said, "because it suited him to be so."

"I do not understand you, chief."

"I will explain myself. Does my brother know how a sale of land is effected?"

"No. I do not; never having to buy or sell, I have not troubled myself about it."

"Wah! in that case I will tell my brother."

"You will cause me pleasure, for I always like to gain information, and this may be useful to me."

"When a pale-face wishes to buy the hunting-ground of a tribe he goes to the principal sachems of the nation, and after smoking the calumet of peace in council, he explains his meaning; the conditions are discussed; if the two contracting parties agree, a plan of the territory is drawn up by the principal sorcerer, the pale-face gives his goods, the chiefs place their sign-manual at the foot of the plan, the trees are blazed with a tomahawk, and the purchaser takes possession."

"Hum," Tranquil remarked, "that seems simple enough."

"In what council has the grey-head chief smoked the calumet? where are the sachems who have treated with him? let him show me the trees that were marked."

"In truth, I fancy he would find that difficult."

"The grey-head," the chief continued, "knew that Monkey-face was cheating him; but the territory suited him, and he calculated on the strength of his arms to hold his own."

"That is probable."

"Conquered by evidence, and recognising too late that he acted inconsiderately, he fancied he could recover all difficulties by offering us a few more bales of merchandise. Whenever did the pale-faces have a straight and honest tongue?"

"Thank you," the hunter said, laughingly.

"I do not speak of my brother's nation; I never had to complain of them, and I only refer to the Long Knives. Does my brother still think that I was wrong?"

"Perhaps, in that circumstance, chief, you were a little too quick, and allowed your passion to carry you away, but you have so many reasons for hating the Americans that I dare not blame you."

"Then I can still count on my brother's assistance?"

"Why should I refuse it to you, chief? Your cause is still as it was, that is to say, just; it is my duty to help you, and I will do so, whatever may happen."

"Och! I thank my brother; his rifle will be useful."

"Here we are; it is time to form a determination with reference to Monkey-face."

"It is formed," the chief answered, laconically.

At this moment, they entered a vast clearing, in the centre of which several fires were burning.

Five hundred Indian warriors, painted and armed for war, were lying about in the grass, while their horses, all harnessed, and ready for mounting, were hobbled.

Round the principal fire several chiefs were crouching and smoking silently.

The new comers dismounted, and proceeded rapidly toward this fire, before which Monkey-face was walking up and down in considerable agitation.

The two men took their places by the side of the other chiefs, and lit their calumets; although every one expected their return impatiently, no one addressed a word to them, Indian etiquette prohibiting a chief from speaking, before the calumet was smoked.

When Black-deer had finished his calumet, he shook out the ashes, passed it through his belt, and said—

"The orders of the sachems are accomplished; the bloody arrows have been delivered to the pale-faces."

The chiefs bowed their heads in sign of satisfaction.

Monkey-face walked up.

"Has my brother Black-deer seen grey-head?" he asked.

"Yes," the chief answered, drily.

"What does my brother think?" Monkey-face pressed him.

Black-deer gave him an equivocal glance.

"What matters the thought of a chief at this moment," he answered, "since the council of the sachems has resolved on war?"

"The nights are long," Blue-fox then said, "will my brothers remain here smoking?"

Tranquil remarked in his turn—

"The Long Knives are on their guard, they are watching at this moment; my brothers will remount their horses, and withdraw, for the hour is not propitious."

The chiefs gave a sign of assent.

"I will go on the discovery," Monkey-face said.

"Good," Black-deer answered, with a stern smile; "my brother is skilful, he sees many things, he will inform us."

Monkey-face prepared to leap on a horse which a warrior led him up, but suddenly Black-deer rose, rushed toward him, and laying his hand roughly on his shoulder, compelled him to fall on his knees.

The warriors, surprised at this sudden aggression, the motive of which they did not divine, exchanged glances of surprise.

Monkey-face quickly raised his head.

"Does the Spirit of evil trouble my brother's brain?" he said.

Black-deer gave a sarcastic smile, and drew his scalping-knife.

"Monkey-face is a traitor," he said; "he has sold his brothers to the pale-faces; he is about to die."

Black-deer was not only a renowned warrior, but his wisdom and honour were held in just repute by the tribe; hence no one protested against the accusation he had made, the more so, because, unfortunately for him, Monkey-face had been long known.

Black-deer raised his knife, whose bluish blade flashed in the fire-light, but by a supreme effort Monkey-face succeeded in freeing himself, bounded like a wild beast, and disappeared in the bushes with a laugh.

The knife had slipped, and only cut the flesh, without inflicting a serious wound on the clever Indian.

There was a moment of stupor, but then all rose simultaneously to rush in pursuit of the fugitive.

"Stay," Tranquil shouted, "it is now too late. Make haste to attack the pale-faces before that villain warns them, for he is meditating fresh treachery."

The chiefs recognised the justice of this advice, and the Indians prepared for the combat.

CHAPTER X.

THE BATTLE.

MEANWHILE, Captain Watt had assembled all the members of the colony in front of the town.

The number of combatants amounted to sixty-two, including the females.

European ladies may think it singular that we count the females among the combatants; in truth, in the old world the days of Bradamante and Joan d'Arc have happily passed away for ever.

But in North America, at the period of which we write, on the prairies it was not so; when the war-yell of the Indians suddenly echoed on the ears of the pioneers, the women were constrained to give up the labour of their sex, to take a rifle in their hands, and fight boldly in defence of the community.

We could, if necessary, cite several of these heroines with soft eyes and angelic countenances who, on occasion, have valiantly done their duty as soldiers.

Mrs. Watt was anything rather than a heroine, but she was the daughter and the wife of a soldier; she was born and brought up on the Indian borders; she had already smelt powder several times and seen blood flow, but, before all, she was a mother. As her children had to be defended, all her feminine timidity had disappeared.

Her example electrified all the other women of the colony, and all had armed, resolved to fight by the side of their husbands and fathers.

We repeat here that, what with men and women, the captain had sixty-two combatants around him.

He tried to dissuade his wife from taking part in the fight, but the gentle creature whom he had seen hitherto so timid and obedient, refused to obey, and the captain was compelled to let her do as she pleased.

He therefore made his arrangements for defence. Twenty-four men were placed

in the intrenchments under the orders of Bothrel. The captain took the command of a second party of twenty-four hunters, intended to act anywhere and everywhere. The females, under the orders of Mrs. Watt, were left in charge of the tower, in which the children and the invalids were shut up.

It was about one when the hunter and the chief left; by half-past two all was ready for the defence.

The captain made a last round of the intrenchments in order to ensure himself that all was in order, then, after ordering all the fires to be extinguished, he secretly left the colony by a concealed door in the palisades.

A plank was placed across the ditch, and the captain crossed, only followed by Bothrel and a Kentuckian of the name of Bob, a daring and broad-shouldered fellow.

The plank was hidden so as to serve for their return, and the three men glided through the dark.

When they had gone about one hundred yards from the colony, the captain halted.

"Gentlemen," he then said, in a voice so faint that they were obliged to stoop down to hear him, "I have chosen you because the expedition we are about to attempt is dangerous."

"What is to be done?" Bothrel asked.

"The night is so dark that those accursed pagans could if they liked reach the very edge of the ditch, and it would be impossible for us to notice them; I have, therefore, resolved to set fire to the piles of planks and roots. A man must know how to make sacrifices when needed; these fires will burn a long while and will spread a brilliant light, enabling us to see our enemies."

"The idea is excellent," Bothrel answered.

"Yes," the captain continued, "still, we must not hide from ourselves that it is extremely perilous; it is plain the Indian scouts are already scattered over the prairies, perhaps very close to us, and when two or three fires have been lighted, if we see them, they will not fail to see us too. Each of us will take the necessary objects, and we will try by the rapidity of our movements to foil the tricks of these demons. To work."

The combustibles and inflammable matters were shared between the three men and they separated.

Five minutes later a spark glistened, then a second, then a third; at the end of a quarter of an hour ten fires were lighted.

Weak at first, they seemed to hesitate for a while, but gradually the flames increased, gained consistency, and soon the whole plain was lit up by the blood-red glare of these immense torches.

The captain and his comrades had been more fortunate than they anticipated in their expedition, for they had succeeded in lighting the piles of wood scattered over the valley, without attracting the attention of the Indians; and they hurried back to the intrenchments at full speed. It was high time, for suddenly a terrible war-yell burst forth behind them, and a large band of Indian warriors appeared on the skirt of the forest, galloping at full speed, and brandishing their weapons like a legion of demons.

But they came up too late to catch the whites; a discharge of musketry greeted the arrival of the Indians, several fell from their horses, and the others turned and fled with great precipitation.

The fight had commenced, but the captain cared little about that; thanks to his lucky expedient, a surprise was impossible.

There was a moment's respite, by which the Americans profited to reload their rifles.

The colonists had felt anxious on seeing the immense fires lit up one after the other on the prairie; they believed in an Indian device, but were soon disabused, by the captain's return, and congratulated themselves on this happy expedient.

The Pawnees had, in all probability, only retired in order to deliberate.

The captain, with his shoulder leant against the palisade, was attentively examining the deserted plain, when he fancied he perceived an unusual motion in a rather large field of Indian corn, about two rifle-shots from the colony.

"Look out!" he said, "the enemy is approaching."

Every one put his finger on his trigger.

All at once a great noise was heard, and the furthest pile of wood fell in, emitting myriads of sparks.

"By heaven!" the captain shouted, "there is some Indian devilry behind that, for it is impossible for that enormous pile to be consumed."

At the same instant another fell in, followed immediately by a third, and then by a fourth.

There could no longer be a doubt as to the cause of these successive falls. The Indians, whose movements were neutralised by the light these monster beacons shed, had taken the very simple method of extinguishing them, which they were enabled to do in perfect safety, for they were out of rifle-range.

No sooner was the wood down than it was scattered in every direction, and easily put out.

This expedient enabled the Indians to get very near.

Still all the piles were not overthrown, and those that remained were near enough to the fort to be defended by its fire.

For all that the Pawnees attempted to put them out.

But the firing then recommenced, and the bullets fell in a hailstorm on the besiegers, who, after holding out for some minutes, were at last compelled to take to flight.

The Americans began laughing at the fugitives.

"I think," Bothrel said, "that those fellows find our soup too hot, and regret having put their fingers in it."

"In truth," the captain remarked, "they do not appear inclined to return this time."

He was mistaken; for, at the same instant, the Indians came back at a gallop.

Nothing could check them, and, in spite of the fusillade, to which they disdained to reply, they reached the very brink of the ditch.

It is true, that once there, they turned back, and retired as rapidly as they had come, though not without leaving on the way a great number of their comrades, whom the American bullets pitilessly laid low.

But the plan of the Pawnees had been successful, and the whites soon perceived that they had been too hasty in congratulating themselves.

Each Pawnee horseman carried on his croup a warrior, who, on reaching the ditch, dismounted, and profiting by the disorder and smoke, which prevented their being seen, sheltered themselves behind the trunks of trees and elevations of the soil so cleverly, that when the Americans leaned over the palisade to discover the results of the enemy's charge, they were in their turn greeted by a discharge of bullets and arrows, which stretched fifteen on the ground.

Fifteen men at one round was a fearful loss to the colonists; the combat was assuming serious proportions, which threatened to degenerate into a defeat; for the Indians had never before displayed so much energy.

No hesitation was possible; the daring force must be dislodged from the position where they had so ambushed themselves.

The captain formed his resolve.

Collecting some twenty resolute men, while the others guarded the palisades, he had the drawbridge lowered, and rushed out.

The enemies then met face to face.

The medley became terrible; the white men and red-skins, intertwined like serpents, drunk with rage and blinded by hatred, only thought of killing each other.

All at once an immense glare illuminated the scene of carnage, and cries of terror rose from the colony.

The captain turned his head, and uttered a shriek of despair at the horrible sight that met his terror-stricken gaze.

The tower and principal buildings were on fire; in the light of the flames the Indians could be seen bounding like demons in pursuit of the defenders of the colony, who, grouped here and there, were attempting a resistance which had now become impossible.

This is what had occurred:

While Black-deer, Blue-fox, and the other principal Pawnee chiefs attempted an attack on the front of the colony, Tranquil, followed by Quoniam, and fifty warriors on whom he could depend, had got into the buffalo-hide canoes, silently descended the river, and landed in the colony itself, before the alarm was given.

Still, we must do the captain the justice of saying that he had not left this side undefended; sentries had been posted there, but, in the disorder occasioned by the Indians' last charge, the sentries, thinking nothing was to be feared from the river, deserted their post to go whither they imagined the danger greatest.

This unpardonable fault ruined the colony.

Tranquil disembarked his party without firing a shot.

The Pawnees, when they had once entered the fort, threw incendiary torches on the wooden buildings, and, uttering their war-cry, rushed on the Americans, whom they placed between two fires.

Tranquil, Quoniam, and some warriors who did not leave them, hurried up to the tower.

Mrs. Watt, although taken by surprise, prepared, however, to defend the post confided to her.

The Canadian approached with hands upraised in sign of peace.

"Surrender, in Heaven's name!" he cried, "or you are lost; the colony is captured!"

"No!" she answered, boldly, "I will never surrender to a coward who betrays his brothers."

"You are unjust to me," the hunter answered, sadly, "I have come to save you."

"I will not be saved by you!"

"Unhappy woman! if not for your own sake, surrender on behalf of your children. See, the tower is on fire!"

The lady raised her eyes, uttered a thrilling shriek, and rushed wildly into the interior of the building.

The other females, trusting in the hunter's words, attempted no resistance, but laid down their arms.

Tranquil entrusted the guard of these poor women to Quoniam, with whom he left a few warriors, and then hurried off to put a stop to the carnage.

Quoniam entered the tower, when he found Mrs. Watt half stifled, and holding her children pressed to her heart with extraordinary strength. The worthy negro threw the young lady across his shoulder, carried her out, and collecting all the females and children, led them to the banks of the Missouri, to get them out of range of the fire, and await the end of the fight.

It was no longer a combat, but a butchery.

The captain, Bothrel, Bob, and some twenty Americans, the only colonists still

alive, were collected in the centre of the esplanade, defending themselves with the energy of despair against a cloud of Indians.

Tranquil, however, succeeded, by repeated entreaties, and braving a thousand perils, in inducing them to lay down their arms, and thus put an end to the carnage.

All at once cries, groans, and entreaties were heard from the river-side.

The hunter dashed off, agitated by a gloomy presentiment.

Black-deer and his warriors followed him. When they reached the spot where Quoniam had collected the women, a fearful sight presented itself to them.

Mrs. Watt and three other females lay motionless on the ground in a pool of blood, Quoniam lay extended in front of them with two wounds, one on his head, the other in his chest.

The captain's children had disappeared.

CHAPTER XI.

THE VENTI DEL POTRERO.

WE will now transfer the scene of our narrative to Texas, and resume our story about sixteen years after.

Dawn was beginning to tinge the clouds with its pearly rays, the stars went out one after the other in the gloomy depths of the sky, and on the extreme blue line of the horizon a bright red reflection, precursor of sunrise, showed that day would ere long appear. Thousands of invisible birds, hidden beneath the foliage, suddenly woke up, and melodiously began their morning concert.

At this moment the breeze rose, burst into the dense cloud of vapour, which at sunrise exhales from the earth in these intropical regions, whirled it round for an instant, then rent it asunder, and scattered it in space; thus displaying the most delicious landscape the mind of poet or painter could imagine.

Through the centre of an immense plain, circled on all sides by the tall foliage of a virgin forest, there ran in capricious windings a sandy road, whose golden colour contrasted harmoniously with the deep green of the grass and the silvery whiteness of a narrow stream which the first beams of the sun caused to sparkle like a casket of jewels. Not far from the stream, and at about the middle of the plain, rose a white house with a verandah running round it, and a roof of red tiles. This house, prettily covered with creepers that almost hid its walls, was a *venta*, or hostelry, built on the top of a small mount.

Before the door of the venta several dragoons, picturesquely grouped, and about twenty in number, were saddling their horses, while the arrieros were actively engaged in loading seven or eight mules.

Along the road, and some paces from the venta, several horsemen, resembling black dots, could be seen just entering the forest, a forest which rose gradually, and was commanded by a girdle of lofty hills.

The door of the venta opened, and a young officer came out singing, accompanied by a stout and jolly-looking monk; after them a charming maiden of eighteen or nineteen, fair-haired and fragile, with blue eyes and golden hair, appeared on the threshold.

"Come, come," the captain said, for the young officer wore the marks of that grade. "we have lost too much time already, so to horse."

"Hum!" the monk growled, "we have had hardly time to breakfast."

"Holy man," the officer said, with a laugh, "if you prefer remaining, you are at liberty to do so."

"No, no, I will go with you," the monk exclaimed, with a look of terror; "*caspita!* I want to take advantage of your escort."

"Then make haste, for I shall give orders to start within five minutes."

The officer, after looking round the plain, gave his *asistente* orders to bring up his horse, and mounted with that grace peculiar to Mexican riders. The monk stifled a sigh of regret, probably thinking of the savoury hospitality he was leaving, to run the risk of a long journey, and, aided by the *arrieros*, he contrived to lift himself on to a mule.

"Ouf!" he muttered, "here I am."

"To horse!" the officer commanded.

The dragoons obeyed at once, and for a few seconds the clash of steel could be heard.

The maiden to whom we have alluded had hitherto stood silent and motionless in the doorway, apparently suffering from some secret agitation, and looking now and then anxiously at two or three *campesinos*, who, leaning negligently against the wall of the *venta*, listlessly followed the movements of the party; but at the moment when the captain was about to give the order to start, she resolutely went up to him and offered him a *mechero*.

"Your cigarette is not lighted, sir," she said, in a soft and melodious voice.

"On my honour, 'tis true," he replied, and, bending gallantly down to her, he returned her the *mechero*, saying, "Thanks, my pretty child."

The girl profited by this movement, which brought his face close to hers, to whisper hurriedly—

"Take care!"

"What?" he said, as he looked fixedly at her. Without replying, she laid her finger on her rosy lips, and, turning quickly away, ran back into the *venta*.

The captain drew himself up, frowned savagely, and bent a threatening glance on the two or three fellows leaning against the wall.

"Bah!" he muttered, "they would not dare."

He then drew his *sabre*, whose blade glistened dazzlingly, and placed himself at the head of the troop.

"Forward!" he shouted.

They started at once.

The mules followed the bell of the *néna*, and the dragoons collected round the mules.

For a few minutes the *campesinos*, who had been watching the departure of the troop, looked after it along the winding road, then re-entered the *venta*.

The girl was seated alone on an *equipal*, apparently busily engaged in sewing; still, through the almost imperceptible tremor that agitated her body, the flush on her brow, and the timid look she shot through her long eye-lashes, it was easy to read that the calmness she affected was far from her heart.

These *campesinos* were three in number; they were men in the full vigour of life, with harshly-marked features, firm glances, and brusque and brutal manners.

They sat down on a bench placed before a clumsily-planed table, and one of them striking it sharply with his fist, turned to the girl and said roughly—

"Drink here. *Mezcal*."

She rose and hastened to serve them; the man who had spoken caught her by the dress as she passed.

"An instant, Carmela," he said.

"Let go my dress, Ruperto," she replied, with a slight pout of ill-humour, "you will tear it for me."

"Nonsense!" he replied, with a coarse laugh, "you must fancy me very awkward."

"No, but your manner does not please me."

"Oh! oh! you are not always so wild, my bird."

"What do you mean?" she continued, with a blush.

"No matter, I understand it; but that is not the question just at present."

"What is it, then?" she asked with feigned surprise; "have I not brought you the mezcal you ordered?"

"Yes, yes; but I have something to say to you."

"Well, say it quickly, and let me go."

"You are in a great hurry to escape; are you afraid lest your lover may surprise you in conversation?"

Ruperto's comrades began laughing, and the maiden stood quite abashed.

"I have no lover, Ruperto, and you know it very well," she answered with tears in her eyes; "it is cruel of you to insult a defenceless girl."

"Nonsense! I am not insulting you, Carmela; what harm is there in a pretty girl like you having a lover?"

"Let me go," she cried, as she made an angry movement to free herself.

"Not before you have answered my question."

"Ask it then, and let us have an end of this."

"Well, my wild little maid, be good enough to repeat to me what you whispered just now to that captain."

"I?" she recoiled in embarrassment; "what do you suppose I said to him?"

"That is the very point. Nina, I do not suppose what you said to him, I merely wish you to tell me what it was."

"Leave me alone, Ruperto, you only take a delight in tormenting me."

The Mexican looked at her searchingly.

"Do not turn the conversation, my beauty," he said drily, "for the question I ask you is serious."

"That is possible; but I have no answer to give you."

"Because you know you have done wrong."

"I do not understand you."

"Of course not! Well, I will explain myself; at the moment the officer was about to start, you said to him, 'Take care.' Would you venture to deny it?"

The girl turned pale.

"Since you heard me," she said, attempting to jest, "why do you ask me?"

The campesinos had frowned on hearing Ruperto's accusation; the position was growing serious.

"Oh, oh!" one of them said; "did she really say that?"

"Apparently, since I heard it," Ruperto retorted.

The girl took a timid glance around, as if imploring an absent protector.

"He is not there," Ruperto remarked cruelly, "so it is of no use looking for him."

"Who?" she asked, hesitating between the shame of the supposition and the terror of her dangerous position.

"He," he answered with a grin. "Listen, Carmela; several times already you have learned more of our business than we liked; I repeat to you the remark you made a minute ago to the captain, and try to profit by it; take care."

"Yes," the second speaker said; "for we might forget that you are only a child, and make you pay dearly."

"Nonsense," the third said, who had hitherto contented himself with drinking, "the law must be equal; if Carmela has betrayed us, she must be punished."

"Well said, Bernardo," Ruperto exclaimed, as he smote the table; "there are just enough of us to pronounce the sentence."

"Good Heavens!" she screamed, as she freed herself by a sudden effort from the grasp of the arm which had hitherto held her; "let me go, let me go."

"Stay!" Ruperto shouted as he rose; "if you do not, some misfortune will happen."

The three men rushed on the maiden, and the latter, half wild with terror, sought in vain the door of the venta by which to escape.

But, at the moment when the three men laid their rough and horny hands on her white and delicate shoulders, the door, whose hasp she had been unable to lift in her terror, was thrown wide open, and a man appeared.

"What is the matter here?" he asked in a harsh voice, as he crossed his hands on his chest.

There was such menace in the voice of the new-comer, such a flash shot from his eyes, that the three terrified men fell back mechanically against the opposing wall, muttering—"The Jaguar! the Jaguar!"

"Save me! save me!" the maiden shrieked, as she rushed wildly towards him.

"Yes," he said in a deep voice; "yes, I will save you, Carmela; woe to the man who causes a hair of your head to fall."

And softly raising her in his powerful arms, he laid her gently on a butacca.

The man who appeared so suddenly was still very young; his beardless face would have seemed that of a child, if his regular features, with their almost feminine beauty, had not been relieved by two large black eyes, which possessed a brilliancy and magnetic power that few men felt themselves capable of enduring.

He was tall, but graceful and elegant, and his chest was wide; his long hair, black as the raven's wing, fell in clusters beneath his vicuna hat, which was ornamented with a deep gold toquilla.

There was in the person of this man, still so young, an attraction so powerful, a governing power so strange, that it was impossible to see him without loving or hating him—so profound was the impression he unconsciously produced on all those, without exception, with whom chance brought him into relation.

No one knew who he was, or whence he came; his very name was unknown; and people had consequently been compelled to give him a sobriquet, with which, however, he did not feel at all offended.

As for his character, the following scenes will make it sufficiently well known for us to dispense for the present with any details.

CHAPTER XII.

LOVE AND JEALOUSY.

THE first feeling of terror which had caused the three men to recoil at the appearance of the Jaguar had worn off; their effrontery had returned on seeing the inoffensive manner of the man they had long been accustomed to fear.

Ruperto, the biggest scoundrel of the three, was the first to regain his coolness, and, reflecting that the man who caused them such terror was alone, he turned resolutely towards him.

"Rayo de Dios!" he said in a brutal voice, "let that girl alone."

The young man started as if a snake had stung him, and darted over his shoulder a glance full of menace.

"Are you speaking to me?" he asked.

"To whom else?" the other answered.

"Ah!" was all the Jaguar said; and without adding another word, he walked slowly toward Ruperto, who watched him with a terror that momentarily increased.

This scene, apparently so simple, must, however, have possessed a terrible significance for the witnesses.

The Jaguar, with livid face, eyes inflamed with blood, and frowning brows, thrust forth his arm to seize Ruperto, who, overcome by terror, could not make a movement to escape from this clutch, which he knew would be mortal.

All at once Carmela bounded like a startled fawn, and cast herself between the two men.

"Oh!" she shrieked, "have pity on him; do not kill him."

"Be it so!" he said; "since such is your wish, he shall not die; still, he insulted you, Carmela, and ought to be punished. On your knees, villain!" he continued, as he turned to Ruperto; "on your knees, and ask pardon of this angel."

"Pardon, pardon!" said Ruperto.

"Enough," the Jaguar replied; "thank Heaven for having escaped my vengeance. Open the door, Carmela."

The girl obeyed.

"To horse!" said the Jaguar; "go wait for me at Rio-Soco."

The men rose, mounted their horses, and left.

The Jaguar sat down at the table where the men had been drinking, buried his face in his hands, and seemed plunged in deep thought.

Carmela looked at him with a strong mixture of timidity and fear.

At length, the young man raised his head, and looked around him, as if suddenly awakened from a deep sleep.

"What, you here?" he said.

"Yes," she answered, softly.

"Thanks, Carmela—you are kind! you alone love me, when all else hate. But, now tell me frankly what happened between you and those scoundrels."

The maiden seemed to hesitate for a moment, but made up her mind and confessed the warning she gave to the captain of dragoons.

"You were wrong," the Jaguar said sternly; "your imprudence may produce much unpleasantness. Yet I dare not blame you; you are a woman, and consequently ignorant of many things. Are you alone?"

"Quite alone."

"What imprudence! how can Tranquil leave you?"

"His duties keep him at present at the Larch-tree, where there is going to be a grand hunt in a few days."

"Hum! at any rate, Quoniam ought to have remained with you."

"He could not, for Tranquil required his help."

"The devil is in the business, as it seems," he said; "he must be mad thus to abandon a girl alone in a venta in the midst of such a desolate country."

"I was not alone, for Lanzi was left with me."

"Ah! and what has become of him?"

"A little before sun-rise I sent him to kill a little game."

"A capital reason; and you have been left exposed to the coarse language and ill-treatment of the first scoundrel who thought proper to insult you."

"I did not think there was any danger."

"Now, I trust you are undeceived."

"Oh!" she cried, "it shall never happen again."

"Good! but I think I hear Lanzi's footsteps,"

She looked out.

"Yes," she replied, "here he is."

The man shortly after entered. He was of about forty years of age, with an intelligent face; he had on his shoulders a magnificent deer, while in his right hand he held a gun.

He gave a look of annoyance on perceiving the young man; still, he bowed slightly to him.

"Oh, oh," the Jaguar said, "you have had a good hunt, it seems; are the deer plentiful?"

"I have known the time when they were more numerous," he replied, gruffly; "but now," he added, shaking his head sorrowfully, "it is a hard matter for a poor man to kill one or two in a day."

The young man smiled.

"They will return," he said.

"No, no," Lanzi replied, "when the deer have been once startled, they do not return to the parts they have left."

"You must put up with it then, master, and take things as they are."

"Well, what else do I?" he growled.

And, after this sally, he reloaded the game on his shoulders, and entered the other room.

"Lanzi is not amiable to-day," the Jaguar observed.

"He is annoyed at meeting you here."

The young man frowned.

"Why so?" he asked.

Carmela blushed and looked down without answering.

The Jaguar looked at her searchingly for a moment.

"I understand," he said; "my presence displeases him."

"Why should it displease him? he is not the master, I suppose."

"That is true; then it displeases your father."

The maiden gave a nod of assent.

The Jaguar sprang up, and walked up and down the room, with his head down, and his arms behind his back; after a few minutes of this behaviour, which Carmela followed with an anxious eye, he stopped before her, raised his head, and looked at her fixedly.

"And does my presence here, Carmela, displease you?"

The girl remained silent.

"Reply," he went on.

"I did not say so," she murmured, with hesitation.

"No," he said, with a bitter smile, "but you think so, Carmela."

She drew herself up proudly.

"You are unjust to me," she replied, with peevish excitement, "unjust and unkind. Why should I—/I, desire your absence? You never did me any harm; on the contrary, I have ever found you ready to defend me; this very day you did not hesitate to protect me from the ill-treatment of the wretches who insulted me."

"Ah! you allow it?"

"Why should I not allow it, since it is true? Do you consider me ungrateful, then?"

"No, Carmela, you are only a woman," he replied.

"I do not understand your meaning, and do not wish to do so; I alone here defend you, when my father, or Quoniam, or anyone else accuses you. You know my father; you know how kind, frank, and worthy he is; many times he has tried to lead you to an honourable explanation—but you have always repulsed his advances. You must, therefore, only blame yourself for the isolation in which you are left, and the solitude formed around you; and do not address reproaches to the only person who, up to the present, has dared to support you against all."

"It is true," he answered bitterly; "I am a madman. I acknowledge my wrongs

towards you, Carmela, for in all this world, you alone have been constantly kind and compassionate for the reprobate—for the man whom the general hatred pursues."

"Hatred as foolish as it is unjust."

"And which you do not share in—is it not?" he exclaimed, sharply.

"No, I do not share it; but I suffer from your obstinacy; for I believe you to be honourable."

"Thank you, Carmela; I wish I had it in my power to prove immediately that you are right, and give a denial to those who insult me like cowards behind my back. Unfortunately, that is impossible for the present; but the day will come when it will be permitted me to make myself known as what I really am, and then—"

"Then?" she repeated, seeing that he hesitated.

Again he hesitated.

"Then," he said in a choking voice, "I shall have a question to ask you, and a request to make."

The maiden blushed, but recovered herself directly.

"You will find me ready to answer both," she murmured, in a low and inarticulate voice.

"Do you mean it?" he asked joyfully.

"I swear it to you."

A flash of happiness lit up the young man's face.

"My good Carmela," he said, "when the moment arrives, I shall remind you of your promise."

She bowed her head in dumb assent.

There was a moment of silence. The maiden attended to her household duties with that bird-like activity peculiar to women; the Jaguar walked up and down the room with a preoccupied air; after a few moments he went to the door and looked out.

"I must be gone," he said.

She gave him a scrutinising glance.

"Ah," she said.

"Yes; then be kind enough to order Lanzi to prepare Santiago. Perhaps if I told him so myself he would feel disinclined to do it."

"I will go," she answered him with a smile.

The young man watched her depart with a sigh.

"What is this I feel?" he muttered, as he pressed his hand powerfully against his heart: "can it be what people call love? I am mad!" he went on, directly after; "how can I, the Jaguar, love? Can a reprobate be beloved?"

A bitter smile contracted his lips; he frowned and muttered in a hollow voice—

"Every man has his task in this world, and I shall know how to accomplish mine."

Carmela came in again.

"Santiago will be ready in a moment. Here are your boots, which Lanzi begged me to give you."

"Thank you," he said.

And he began fastening on his legs those two pieces of stamped leather which in Mexico play the part of gaiters, and serve to protect the rider from the horse.

While the young man fastened on his botas, with one foot on the bench, and his body bent forward, Carmela examined him attentively.

The Jaguar noticed it.

"What do you want?" he asked her.

"Nothing," she said, stammering.

"You are deceiving me, Carmela. Come—time presses—tell me the truth."

"Well," she replied, with a hesitation more and more marked, "I have a prayer to make to you."

"Speak quickly, Nina, for you know that, whatever it may be, I grant it to you."

"Well, whatever may happen, I desire that if you meet the captain of dragoons who was here this morning, you will grant him your protection."

The young man sprang up, as if stung by a viper.

"Ah, then," he shrieked, "what I was told was true, then?"

"I do not know what you are alluding to, but I repeat my request."

"I do not know the man, since I did not arrive until after his departure."

"Yes, you know him," she continued boldly. "Why seek a subterfuge, if you wish to break the promise you made me? It would be better to be frank."

"It is well," he replied, in a gloomy voice; "re-assure yourself, Carmela, I will defend your lover."

And he rushed madly from the venta.

"Oh!" the maiden exclaimed, as she fell on a bench; "oh! that demon is properly christened the Jaguar! he has a tiger's heart in his bosom."

She buried her face in her hands, and broke out into sobs.

At the same moment the rapid gallop of a retreating horse was heard.

CHAPTER XIII.

CARMELA.

AMONG the provinces of the vast territory of New Spain, there was one, the most eastern of all, whose real value the government of viceroys constantly ignored. This ignorance was kept up by the Mexican Republic, which at the period of the proclamation of Independence, did not think it worthy of being formed into a separate state, and, without dreaming of what might happen at a later date, negligently allowed it to be colonised by North Americans, who even at that time seemed infected by that fever of encroachment and aggrandisement which has now become a species of mania among these worthy citizens—we refer to Texas.

This magnificent country is one of the most fortunately situated in Mexico; territorially regarded, it is immense; no country is better watered, for considerable rivers pour into the sea, their waters swollen by countless streams which fertilize this country, as they traverse it in every direction.

The climate of Texas is healthy, and exempt from those frightful diseases which have given such a sinister celebrity to certain countries of the New World.

The natural borders of Texas are the Sabine on the east, Red River on the north, to the west a chain of lofty mountains, which enters vast prairies, and the Rio Bravo del Norte, and lastly, from the mouth of the latter river to that of the Sabine, the Gulf of Mexico.

We have said that the Spaniards were almost ignorant of the real value of Texas, although they had been acquainted with it for a very long time.

Still the honour of the first settlement attempted in this fine country belongs incontestably to France.

In fact, the unfortunate and celebrated Robert de la Salle, ordered by the Marquis de Siegnelay to discover the mouth of the Mississippi in 1684, made a mistake, and entered the Rio de Colorado, which he descended with countless difficulties, till he reached the San Bernardo lagoon, where he built a fort between Velasco and Matagorda, and took possession of the country.

A later reminiscence attaches France to Texas, for it was there that General Lalle-

mand attempted in 1817 to found a colony of French refugees, the unhappy relics of the armies of the first empire. This colony, situated about ten leagues from Galveston, was destroyed by the orders of the Viceroy Apodaca, by virtue of the despotic system, constantly followed by the Spaniards of the New World, of not allowing strangers, under any pretext, to establish themselves on their territory.

At the period when the events occurred which we have undertaken to narrate, that is to say, in the latter half of 1829, Texas still belonged to Mexico, but its revolution had begun, it was struggling valiantly to escape from the yoke of the central government, and proclaim its independence.

Before, however, we continue, we must explain how it was that Tranquil, the Canadian hunter, and Quoniam, the negro, who was indebted to him for liberty, whom we left on the Upper Missouri leading the free life of wood-rangers, found themselves established, as it were, in Texas, and how the hunter had a daughter, or, at any rate, called his daughter, the lovely fair-haired girl we have presented to the reader.

About twelve years before the day we visit the venta, Tranquil arrived at the same hostelry, accompanied by two comrades, and a child of five or six years of age, with blue eyes, ruddy lips, and golden hair, who was no other than Carmela; as for his comrades, one was Quoniam, the other an Indian half-breed, who answered to the name of Lanzi.

The sun was just about setting when the little party halted in front of the venta.

The host, but little accustomed in this desolate country, close to the Indian border, to see travellers at so late an hour, had already closed his house, and was himself getting ready for bed, when the unexpected arrival forced him to alter his arrangements for the night.

It was, however, only with marked repugnance, and on the repeated assurances the travellers made him that he had nought to fear, that he at length decided to open his door, and admit them to his house.

Once that he had resolved to receive them, the host was as he should be to his guests, that is to say, polite and attentive, as far as that can enter into the character of a Mexican landlord.

He was a short, stout man, with cat-like manners, and crafty looks, of a certain age, but still quick and active.

When the travellers had placed their horses in the corral, before a good stock of alfalfa, and had themselves supped with the appetite of men who have made a long journey, the ice was broken between them and the host, thanks to a few trajos of Caralonian refino, liberally offered by the Canadian, and the conversation went on upon a footing of the truest cordiality, while the little girl, carefully wrapped up in the hunter's warm zarapé, was sleeping with the calm and simple carelessness of her happy age.

"Well, gossip," Tranquil said gaily, as he poured out a glass of refino for the host; "I fancy you must lead a jolly life of it here."

"I?"

"Hang it, yes; you go to bed with the bees, and I feel certain you are in no hurry to get up in the morning."

"What else can I do in this accursed desert?"

"Are travellers so rare, then?"

"Yes and no; it depends on the meaning you give the word."

"Confound it! there are not two meanings, I should fancy. Explain."

"That is easy enough: there is no lack of vagabonds of every colour in the country, and if I liked, they would fill my house the whole blessed day; but they would not show me the colour of their money."

"Ah, very good; but these estimable caballeros do not constitute the whole of your customers?"

"No ; there are also the Indios Bravos, Comanches, Apaches, and Pawnees, and Heaven alone knows who else, who prowl about the neighbourhood."

"Hum ! they are queer neighbours, and if you have only such customers, I am of your opinion ; still, you must now and then receive pleasanter visits."

"Yes, from time to time, straggling travellers like yourself, of course ; but the profits, in any case, are far from covering the expenses."

"In that case, though, allow me a remark which may appear to you indiscreet."

"Speak, speak, caballeros, we are talking as friends, so have no chance of offence."

"You are right. If you are so uncomfortable here, why the deuce do you remain ?"

"Why, where would you have me go ?"

"Well, I do not know, but you will be better off anywhere than here."

"Ah ! if it only depended on me," he said.

"Have you anybody with you here ?"

"No, I am alone."

"Well, what prevents you going then ?"

"Eh, caramba, the money ! all I possessed, and that was not much, was spent in building this house, and installing myself, and I could not have managed it had it not been for the peons."

"Is there a hacienda here ?"

"Yes, the Larch-tree hacienda, about four leagues off, so that, if I go, I must give up my all."

"Ah, ah," Tranquil said, "very good. Why not sell it ?"

"Where are the buyers ? Do you fancy it so easy to find about here a man with four or five hundred piastres in his pocket ?"

"Well, I can't say, but I fancy by seeking he could be found."

"Nonsense, gossip, you are jesting ?"

"On my word, no," Tranquil said, "and I will prove it you. You say you will sell your house for four hundred piastres."

"I admit that ; what next ?"

"Well, I will buy it if you like."

"It is a matter worthy of consideration."

"Say yes or no, take it or leave it. Perhaps I may change my mind in five minutes."

"Then, with all my heart I accept."

"In that case, I will give you, not four hundred, but six hundred piastres on one condition."

"I am agreeable," was the reply ; "but what is it ?"

"That to-morrow, so soon as the sale is completed, you will mount your horse—start, and never show yourself here again."

"Oh ! you may be quite certain on that point."

"It's settled then ?"

"Perfectly."

The conversation ended here. The travellers wrapped themselves in their fressadas and zarapés, lay down on the lumpy floor of the room, and fell asleep ; the host followed their example.

As was arranged between them, the landlord, a little before daybreak, saddled his horse, and went to fetch the witnesses necessary for the validity of the transaction ; for this purpose he galloped to the Larch-tree hacienda and returned by sunrise, accompanied by the major-domo and seven or eight peons.

The major-domo, the only one who could read and write, drew up the deed, and read it aloud.

Tranquil then took thirty-seven and a half gold onzas from his girdle, and spread them out on the table.

"Be witnesses, caballeros," the major-domo said, addressing his audience, "that Senor Tranquillo has paid the six hundred piastres agreed on for the purchase of the Venta del Potrero."

"We are witnesses," they replied.

Then all present, the major-domo at their head, passed into the corral behind the house.

On reaching it, Tranquil pulled up a tuft of grass which he cast over his shoulder; then picking up a stone, he hurled it over the opposite wall: according to the terms of Mexican law, he was now the owner.

"Be witness, senores," the major-domo again spoke, "that Senor Tranquillo, here present, has legally taken possession of this estate. *Dios y libertad!*"

"*Dios y libertad!*" the others shouted; "long life to the new huesped!"

All the formalities being performed, they now returned to the house, when Tranquil poured out bumpers for his witnesses.

The ex-landlord, faithful to his agreement, pressed the buyer's hand, mounted his horse, and went off, wishing him good luck.

This was how the hunter arrived in Texas.

He left Lanzi and Quoniam at the venta with Carmela. As for himself, thanks to the major-domo, who recommended him to his master, Don Hilario de Vaureal, he entered the Larch-tree hacienda in the capacity of tigrero or tiger-killer.

Although the country selected by the hunter to establish himself was on the confines of the Mexican border, and, for that reason, almost deserted, the vaqueros and peons cudgelled their brains for some time in trying to discover the reason which had compelled so clever and brave a hunter as the Canadian to retire there. But all the efforts made to discover this reason, all the questions asked, remained without result.

At length the disappointed people gave up trying to find the explanation of this enigma, trusting to time, that great clearer up of mysteries, to tell them at length the truth which was so carefully concealed.

But weeks, months, years elapsed, and nothing raised even a corner of the hunter's secret.

Carmela had grown an exquisite maiden, and the venta had increased the number of its customers. This border, hitherto so quiet, owing to its remoteness from the towns and pueblos, felt the movement which the revolutionary ideas imparted to the centre of the country; travellers became more frequent, and the hunter, who had up to this time appeared rather careless as to the future, trusting for his safety in the isolation of his abode, began to grow anxious, not for himself, but for Carmela.

The hunter, wishful no longer to leave the maiden in the dangerous position into which circumstances had thrown her, was actively employed in warding off the misfortunes he foresaw; for, although it is impossible, for the present, to know what ties attached him to the girl who called him father, we will state here that he felt a really paternal affection and devotion for her, in which, indeed, Quoniam and Lanzi imitated him.

A smile from Carmela rendered them happy; the slightest frown from her made them sorrowful.

We must add, that although she was aware of the full extent of her power, Carmela did not abuse it.

Now that we have given these details, doubtless very imperfect, but the only ones possible, we will resume our narrative.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CONDUCTA DE PLATA.

WE return to the caravan, which we saw leave the Potrero, and in the chief of which Carmela seemed interested.

This chief was a young man of about five-and-twenty, with delicate, dashing, and distinguished features; he wore, with supreme elegance, the brilliant uniform of a captain of dragoons.

Although he belonged to one of the oldest families in Mexico, Don Juan Melendez de Gongora would only owe his promotion to himself; an extraordinary desire in a country where military honour is regarded almost as nothing.

Still Don Juan had persevered in his eccentric idea, and each step he won was not the result of a pronunciamiento, but that of a brilliant action. Don Juan belonged to that class of real Mexicans who honestly love their country.

The force of virtue is so great, even on the most depraved natures, that Captain Don Juan Melendez de Gongora was respected by all who approached him.

However, the captain's virtue had nothing austere or exaggerated about it; he was a thorough soldier, gay, obliging, brave, and ever ready to help, either with his arm or purse, all those, friends or foes, who had recourse to him. Such was the man who commanded the caravan, and granted his protection to the monk.

This worthy Frayle deserves a detailed description.

Physically, he was a man about fifty, almost as tall as he was wide, bearing a striking likeness to a barrel set on legs, and yet gifted with far from common strength and activity; his violet nose, his huge lips, and ruddy face, gave him a jovial appearance, which two little grey sunken eyes, full of fire and resolution, rendered ironical and mocking.

Morally, he was in no way distinguished from the majority of Mexican monks—that is to say, he was ignorant as a carp, prone to drinking, a passionate lover of the fair sex, and superstitious in the highest degree; but for all that, the best companion in the world, at home in all society, and always able to raise a laugh.

What singular accident could have brought him so far on the border? This no one knew or cared for, as every one was aware of the vagabond humour of Mexican monks.

At this period, Texas, joined to another province, formed a state called Texas and Cohahuila.

The party commanded by Don Juan de Melendez left Nagogdoches eight days previously, bound for Mexico; but the captain, in accordance with the instructions he received, left the ordinary road, inundated with bands of brigands of every description, and made a long circuit to avoid the ill-famed gorges of the Sierra de San Saba. He would still have to cross that range; but on the side of the great prairies, that is to say, at the spot where the plateaux, gradually descending, do not offer those variations of landscape which are so dangerous to travellers.

The ten mules the captain escorted must be loaded with very precious merchandise for the Federal Government—seeing the small number of troops it had in the State—to have resolved on having it conveyed by forty dragoons under an officer of Don Juan's reputation.

In fact, the merchandise was very valuable; these mules transported three millions of piastres, which would assuredly be a grand windfall for the insurgents, if they fell into their hands.

The time was left far behind, when, under the rule of the Viceroy, the Spanish

flag borne at the head of a train of fifty or sixty mules laden with gold was sufficient to protect a *conducta de plata* effectually, and enable it to traverse, without the slightest risk, the whole width of Mexico.

Now, it was not sixty mules; but ten, which forty resolute men seemed hardly sufficient to protect.

The government considered it advisable to employ the greatest prudence in sending off this *conducta*, which had long been expected at Mexico. The greatest silence was maintained as to the departure, and the road.

The bales were made so as to conceal, as far as possible, the nature of the merchandise; the mules, sent off one by one, only under the protection of the *arriero*, joined, fifteen leagues off, the escort which had been encamped for more than a month in an ancient presidio.

All had, therefore, been foreseen and calculated with the greatest care and intelligence to get this precious merchandise in safety to its destination; the *arrieros*, the only persons who knew the value of their load, would be careful not to speak about it, for the little they possessed was made responsible for the safety of their freight.

The *conducta* advanced in the most excellent order, to the sound of the Nena's bells; the *arrieros* sang gaily to their mules, urging them on by this eternal "*arrea, Mula, arrea, Linda!*"

The pennons fastened to the long lances of the dragoons fluttered in the morning breeze, and the captain listened idly to the monk's chatter.

"Come, come, Fray Antonio," he said to his stout companion, "you can no longer regret having set out at so early an hour, for the morning is magnificent."

"Yes, yes," the other replied with a laugh; "thanks to Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, honourable captain, we are in the best possible state for travelling."

"Well, I am glad to find you in such good spirits, for I feared lest the rather sudden waking this morning might have stirred up your bile."

"I, good gracious, honourable captain!" he replied; "we unworthy members of the church must submit without murmuring to all the tribulations which it pleases the Lord to send us; and besides, life is so short, that it is better only to look at the bright side."

"Bravo! that is the sort of philosophy I like; you are a good companion, padre—I hope we shall travel together for a long while."

"That depends a little on you, *senor captain*."

"On me? how so?"

"Well, on the direction you propose following."

"Hum!" Don Juan said; "and pray where may you be going, *senor padre*?"

This old-fashioned tactic of answering one question by another is excellent, and nearly always succeeds. This time the monk was caught; but, as is the habit of his brethren, his answer was evasive.

"On, I," he said, "all roads are nearly the same to me; my gown assures me, wherever chance bends my steps, pleasant faces and hearty reception."

"That is true; hence I am surprised at the question you asked me an instant back."

"Oh, it is not worth troubling yourself about, honourable captain. I should feel agonised at having annoyed you, hence I humbly beg you to pardon me."

"You have in no way annoyed me, *senor padre*. I have no reason for concealing the road I purpose following; this recua of mules I am escorting does not affect me in any way, and I propose leaving it to-morrow or the day after."

The monk could not restrain a start of surprise.

"Ah!" he said, as he looked searchingly at the speaker.

"Oh yes," the captain continued, "these worthy men begged me to accompany

them for a few days, through fear of the gavillas that infest the roads; they have valuable merchandise, and would not like to be plundered."

"It would not be at all pleasant for them."

"Would it? hence I did not like to refuse them the slight service which took me only a little way out of my road; but so soon as they consider themselves in safety, I shall leave them and enter the prairie, in accordance with the instructions I have received, for you know that the *Indios bravos* are stirring."

"No, I was not aware of it."

"Well, in that case, I tell it you; there is a magnificent opportunity that presents itself to you."

"A magnificent opportunity for me?" the monk repeated in amazement; "what opportunity, honourable captain?"

"For preaching to the infidels, and teaching them the dogmas of our holy faith," he replied.

At this proposal the monk made a frightful face.

"Deuce take the opportunity!" he exclaimed, snapping his fingers; "I will leave that to other asses!"

"As you please, padre; still, you are wrong."

"That is possible, honourable captain, but hang me if I accompany you near those pagans; in two days I shall leave you."

"So soon as that?"

"Why, I suppose, that since you are going on to the prairie, you will leave the recua of mules you are escorting at the rancho of San Jacinto."

"It is probable."

"Well, I will go on with the muleteers; as all dangerous passes will then have been left behind, I shall have nothing to fear."

"Ah," the captain said, with a piercing glance; but he was unable to continue this conversation, which seemed highly interesting, for a horseman galloped up at full speed from the front, stopped before him, and stooping to his ear, whispered a few words.

The captain looked scrutinisingly round him, drew himself up in the saddle, and addressed the soldier—

"Very good. How many are they?"

"Two, captain."

"Watch them, but do not let them suspect they are prisoners; on arriving at the halting-ground I will cross-question them. Rejoin your comrades."

The soldier bowed respectfully without reply, and went off at the same speed he had come up.

Captain Melendez had long accustomed his subordinates not to discuss his orders, but obey.

We mention this fact because it is excessively rare in Mexico, where military discipline is almost a nullity, and subordination is unknown.

Don Juan closed up the ranks of the escort, and ordered them to hurry on.

The monk had seen with secret alarm the conference between the officer and the soldier, of which he was unable to catch a word. When the captain, after attentively watching the execution of his orders, returned to his place by his side, Father Antonio tried to jest about what had happened.

"Oh, oh," he said to him, with a loud laugh, "how gloomy you are, captain! did you see three owls flying on your right?"

"Perhaps so," the captain dully replied.

The tone in which the remark was uttered had nothing friendly or inviting about it. The monk understood that any conversation at this moment was impossible; he took the hint, bit his lips, and continued to ride silently by his companion's side.

An hour later they reached the bivouac ; neither the monk nor the officer had said a word ; but the nearer they came to the spot selected for a halt, the more anxious each seemed to grow.

CHAPTER XV.

THE HALT.

THE sun had entirely disappeared on the horizon at the moment when the caravans reached the halting-ground.

This spot, situated on the top of a rather scarped hill, had been selected with that sagacity which distinguishes Texan or Mexican *arrieros* ; any surprise was impossible, and the aged trees that grew on the crest of the hill would, in the event of an attack, offer a secure protection against bullets.

The mules were unloaded, but, contrary to the usual custom, the bales, instead of being employed as a breastwork for the camp, were piled up and placed out of reach of the marauders whom chance or cupidity might attract.

Seven or eight large fires were lit in a circle, in order to keep off wild beasts ; the mules received their ration of Indian corn on *mantas* or horsecloths laid on the ground ; then, so soon as sentinels were posted round the camp, the troopers and *arrieros* were busily engaged in preparing the supper.

Captain Don Juan and the monk, who had gone a little aside to a fire lit expressly for them, were beginning to smoke their husk cigarettes, while the officer's servant was hastily preparing his master's meal—a meal, we are bound to say, as simple as that of the other members of the caravan, but which hunger had the privilege of rendering not only appetising, but almost succulent.

The captain soon finished his supper. He then rose, and, as night had completely fallen, went to visit the sentries, and see that all was in order. When he resumed his place by the fire, Father Antonio, with his feet turned to the flame, and wrapped in a thick *zarapé*, was sleeping, or pretending to sleep, soundly.

Don Juan examined him for a moment with an expression of hatred and contempt impossible to describe, shook his head twice or thrice thoughtfully, and then told his *asistente* to have the two prisoners brought up.

These prisoners had hitherto been kept apart ; though treated with respect, it was, however, easy for them to see that they were guarded with the greatest care ; still, either through carelessness or some other reason, they did not appear to notice the fact, for their weapons had been left them, and judging from their muscular force and energetic features, though both had reached middle life, there was fair ground for supposing when the moment arrived for them to insist on their liberty, they would be the men to try and regain it by force.

Without any remark they followed the captain's servant, and soon found themselves before that officer.

Though the night was gloomy, the flames of the fire spread sufficient light around to illumine the faces of the new comers.

On seeing them Don Juan gave a start of surprise, but one of the prisoners laid his finger on his lip to recommend prudence to him, and at the same time glanced significantly at the monk.

The captain understood this dumb warning, to which he replied by a light nod of the head.

"Who are you ?" he asked, as he idly rolled a cigarette between his fingers.

"Hunters," one of the prisoners answered, without hesitation, "but before giving any further answer to your questions," he said, "I should like to ask you one in my turn."

"What is it?"

"Your right to cross-question me?"

"Look round you," the captain lightly replied.

"Yes, I understand you—the right of force. Unluckily I do not recognise that right. I am a free hunter, acknowledging no master but myself."

"Oh, oh! your language is bold, comrade."

"It is that of a man not accustomed to yield to any arbitrary power; to take me you have abused—I do not say your strength, for your soldiers would have killed me before compelling me to follow them, had not such been my intention—but the facility with which I confided in you."

"Your haughty language has no effect on me, and were it my good pleasure to force you to speak, I could compel you."

"Yes," the prisoner said, bitterly, "the Mexicans remember the Spaniards, their ancestors, and appeal to torture when necessary; well, try it, captain—what prevents you?"

"Enough of this," the captain said. "If I give you your liberty, should I deliver a friend or a foe?"

"Neither."

"Hum! what do you mean?"

"My answer is clear enough, surely."

"Still, I do not understand it."

"I will explain in two words."

"Speak."

"Both of us being placed in diametrically opposite positions, chance has thought proper to bring us together to-day; if we now part, we shall take with us no feeling of hatred through our meeting, because neither you nor I have had cause to complain of each other, and probably we shall never see each other again."

"Still, it is plain that when my soldiers found you, you were expecting somebody on this road."

"Who knows?" replied the prisoner, laughing; "perhaps it was more precious game than you may fancy, and of which you would like to have your share."

The monk gave a slight start, and opened his eyes.

"What?" he said, addressing the captain, and stifling a yawn. "You are not asleep, Don Juan?"

"Not yet," the latter answered. "I am questioning the two men my van-guard arrested some hours ago."

"Ah!" the monk remarked, "these poor devils do not appear to me very alarming."

"You think so?"

"I do not know what you can have to fear from these men."

"Perhaps they are spies."

"Spies?" he said; "do you fear an ambushade?"

"Under the circumstances in which we now are, that supposition is not so improbable, I fancy."

"Nonsense! in a country like this, and with the escort you have at your service, that would be extraordinary; moreover, these two men let themselves be captured without resistance."

"That is true."

"It is evident, then, that they had no bad intentions. If I were you, I would quietly let them go where they pleased."

"You seem to take a great interest in these two strangers."

"I? not the least in the world. I only tell you what is right, that's all."

"You may be right, still I will not set these people at liberty till they have told me the name of the person they were expecting."

"Were they expecting anybody?"

"They say so, at any rate."

"It is true, captain," said the person who had hitherto spoken; "but though we knew you were coming, it was not you we were waiting for."

"Who was it, then?"

"Answer, Fray Antonio," the prisoner said, "for you alone can reveal the name the captain asks of us."

"I!" the monk said, with a start of passion, and turning as pale as a corpse.

"Ah, ah!" the captain said, as he turned to him, "this is beginning to grow interesting."

It was a singular scene presented by the four men standing round the fire.

The captain carelessly smoked his cigarette, while looking sarcastically at the monk, on whose face impudence and fear were fighting a battle every incident in which was easy to read; the two hunters, with their hands crossed over the muzzles of their long rifles, smiled cunningly, and seemed to be quietly enjoying the embarrassment of the man.

"Don't pretend to look surprised, Padre Antonio," the prisoner said; "you know we were expecting you."

"Me?" the monk said, in a choking voice; "the scoundrel is mad, on my soul."

"I am not mad, padre, and I will trouble you not to employ such language toward me," the prisoner replied.

"Come, give in," the other, who had hitherto been silent, cried coarsely; "I do not care to dance at the end of a rope for your good pleasure."

"Which will inevitably happen," the captain remarked, quietly, "if you do not decide, caballeros, on giving me a clear and explicit explanation."

"There you see, Senor Frayle," the prisoner said, "our position is growing delicate; come, behave like a man."

"Oh!" the monk exclaimed, furiously, "I have fallen into a horrible trap."

"Enough," the captain said, in a thundering voice; "this farce has lasted only too long, Padre Antonio. It is not you who have fallen into a trap, but you tried to draw me into one. I have known you for a long time, and possess the most circumstantial details about the plans you were devising. It is a dangerous game you have been playing; a man cannot serve God and the devil simultaneously, without all being discovered at last; still, I wished to confront you with these worthy men, in order to confound you."

At this rude apostrophe the monk was for a moment stunned, crushed as he was beneath the weight of the charges brought against him.

"Of what am I accused?" he asked, at last.

"You are accused," replied Don Juan, "of having wished to lead the conducta I command into an ambush, and at this moment your worthy acolytes are waiting to massacre and rob us. What will you reply to that?"

"Nothing," he answered, drily.

"You are right. Still, now that you are convicted by your own confession, you will not escape without an eternal recollection of our meeting."

"Take care of what you are about to do, senor captain: I belong to the church, and this gown renders me inviolable."

"No matter for that," he replied, "it shall be stripped off you."

Most of the troopers, aroused by the loud voices of the monk and the officer, had gradually drawn nearer.

The captain pointed to the monk, and addressed the soldiers.

"Strip off the gown that covers that man," he said; "fasten him to a catalpa, and give him two hundred lashes with a *chicote*."

"Villains!" the monk exclaimed, nearly out of his mind; "any man of you who dares to lay hands on me I curse."

The soldiers stopped in terror before this anathema.

"Wretched madman," said the monk, addressing the officer, "I could punish you for your audacity, but I pardon you. Heaven will undertake to avenge me, and you will be punished when your last hour arrives. Farewell! Make room for me to pass, fellows!"

The dragoons, confused and timid, fell back slowly and hesitatingly before him; the captain, forced to confess his impotence, clenched his fists, as he looked passionately around him.

The monk had all but passed through the ranks of the soldiers, when he suddenly felt his arm clutched; he turned with the evident intention of severely reprimanding the man who was so audacious as to touch him, but the expression of his face suddenly changed on seeing who it was that stopped him, and looked at him craftily, for it was no other than the strange prisoner.

"One moment, *senor padre*," the hunter said. "I can understand that these worthy fellows, who are Catholics, should fear your curse, and dare not lay a hand on you through their dread of eternal flames, but with me it is different. I am a heretic, as you know, hence I run no risk in taking off your gown, and, with your permission, I will do you that slight service."

"Oh!" the monk replied, as he ground his teeth; "I will kill you, John, I will kill you, villain!"

"Nonsense! threatened people live a long while," John replied.

"There," he continued; "now, my fine fellows, you can carry out your captain's orders in perfect safety; this man is no more to you than the first comer."

The hunter's bold action suddenly broke the spell that enchained the soldiers. When the much-feared gown no longer covered the monk's shoulders, listening to neither prayers nor threats, they seized the culprit, fastened him, in spite of his cries, securely to a catalpa, and conscientiously administered the two hundred lashes decreed by the captain, while the hunters played their part by counting the blows and laughing loudly at the contortions of the wretched man.

At the one hundred and twenty-eighth lash the monk became silent; his nervous system was completely overthrown; still, he did not faint, his teeth were clenched, a white foam escaped from his crisped lips, he looked fixedly before him without seeing anything, and giving no other signs of existence than the heavy sighs which upheld his muscular chest.

When the punishment was ended, and he was unfastened, he fell to the ground like a log.

His robe was handed back to him, and he was left to lie there, no one troubling himself further about him.

The two hunters then went off, after talking to the captain for some minutes in a low voice.

The rest of the night passed away without incident.

A few minutes before sunrise, the soldiers and *arrieros* prepared everything for the start.

"Stay," the captain suddenly exclaimed, "where is the monk? we cannot abandon him thus; lay him on a mule, and we will leave him at the first rancho."

The soldiers hastened to obey, but all their search was in vain; he had disappeared.

Don Juan frowned at the news, but, after a moment's reflection, he shook his head carelessly.

"All the better," he said, "he would have been in our way."

The *conducta* herewith started again.

CHAPTER XVI.

A POLITICAL SKETCH.

At the period when our story opens, the exasperation in Texas against the Mexicans and the enthusiasm for the noble cause of independence had reached their acme.

About three weeks previously, a serious engagement had taken place between the garrison of Bejar and a detachment of Texan volunteers, commanded by Austin, one of the most renowned chiefs of the insurgents; in spite of their inferiority in numbers and ignorance of military tactics, the colonists fought so bravely, and worked their solitary gun so skilfully, that the Mexican troops, after undergoing serious losses, were compelled to retreat precipitately on Bejar.

This action was the first on the west of Texas after the capture of Fort Velasco; it decided the revolutionary movement which ran through the country like a train of gunpowder.

On all sides the towns raised troops to join the army of liberation; resistance was organised on a grand scale, and bold guerilla chiefs began traversing the country in every direction, making war on their own account, and serving after their fashion the cause they embraced and which they were supposed to be defending.

Captain Don Juan Melendez, surrounded by enemies the more dangerous because it was impossible for him to know their numbers or guess their movements; entrusted with an extremely delicate mission; having at each step a prescience of treachery incessantly menacing, though ignorant where, when, or how it would burst on him; was compelled to employ extreme precautions and a merciless severity, if he wished to get safe home the precious charge confided to him; hence he had not hesitated before the necessity of instituting an example by roughly punishing Padre Antonio.

For a long time past grave suspicions had been gathering over the monk; his ambiguous conduct had aroused distrust and caused presumptions in no way favourable to his honesty.

Don Juan had determined to clear up his doubts at the first opportunity that offered; we have stated in what way he had succeeded by springing a counter mine, that is to say, by having the spy watched by others more skilful than himself, and catching him almost red-handed.

Still, we must do the worthy monk the justice of declaring that his conduct had not the slightest political motive; his thoughts were not so elevated as that; knowing that the captain was entrusted with the charge of a *conducta de plata*, he had only tried to draw him into a trap, for the sake of having a share in the plunder, and making his fortune at a stroke, in order that he might enjoy these indulgences he had hitherto gone without; the worthy man was simply a highway robber.

We will leave him for the present to follow the two hunters to whom he was indebted for the rude chastisement he received, and who quitted the camp immediately after the execution of the sentence.

These two men went off at a great speed, and, after descending the hill, buried

themselves in a thick wood, where two magnificent prairie horses, half-tamed mustangs, with flashing eye and delicate limbs, were quietly browsing, while waiting for their riders; they were saddled in readiness for mounting.

After unfastening the hobbles, the hunters put the bits in their mouths, mounted, and, digging in their spurs, started at a sharp gallop.

They rode for a long distance, bent over their horses' necks, following no regular path, but going straight on, caring little for the obstacles they met on their passage, and which they cleared with infinite skill; about an hour before sunrise they at length stopped.

They had reached the entrance of a narrow gorge, flanked on both sides by lofty wooded hills, the spurs of the mountains, whose denuded crests seemed from their proximity to hang over the landscape. The hunters dismounted before entering the gorge, and after hobbling their horses, which they hid in a clump of floripondios, they began exploring the neighbourhood with the care and sagacity of Indian warriors.

Their researches remained for a long time sterile; at length, after two hours, the first beams of the sun dissipated the darkness, and they perceived some almost imperceptible traces, which made them start with joy.

Probably feeling now liberated from the anxiety that tormented them, they returned to their horses, lay down on the ground, and after fumbling in their alforjas, drew from them the materials for a modest breakfast, to which they did honour with the formidable appetite of men who have spent the whole night in the saddle.

Since their departure from the Mexican camp the hunters had not exchanged a syllable, apparently acting under the influence of a dark preoccupation, which rendered any conversation unnecessary.

In fact, the silence of men accustomed to desert life is peculiar; they pass whole days without uttering a word, only speaking when necessity obliges them, and generally substituting for oral language the language of signs, which has the incontestable advantage of not betraying the presence of those who employ it to the ears of invisible enemies constantly on the watch, and ready to leap, like birds of prey, on the imprudent persons who allow themselves to be surprised.

When the hunters' appetite was appeased, the one whom the captain called John lit his short pipe, and placed it in the corner of his mouth.

"Well, Sam," he said in a low voice, as if afraid of being overheard, "I fancy we have succeeded, eh?"

"I think so too, John," Sam replied with a nod of affirmation; "you are deucedly clever, my boy."

"Nonsense," the other said; "there is no merit in deceiving those brutes."

"No matter, the captain fell into the hole in a glorious way."

"Hum! it was not he I was afraid of; for he and I have been good friends for a long time; but it was the confounded monk."

"Eh, eh! if he had not arrived just in time he would probably have spoiled our fun; what is your opinion?"

"I think you are right, Sam. By Jabers, I laughed at seeing him writhe under the chicote."

"It was certainly a glorious sight; but are you not afraid that he may avenge himself?"

"Bah! what have we to fear from such vermin? he will never dare to look us in the face."

"No matter, we had better be on our guard. Our trade is a queer one, and it is very possible that some day or other this accursed animal may play us a trick."

"Don't bother about him; what we did was all fair in war. Be assured that, under similar circumstances, the monk would not have spared us."

"That is true; so let him go to the deuce; the more so as the prey we cover could not be in a better situation."

"Shall we remain here in ambush?"

"That is the safest way; we shall have time to rejoin our comrades when we see the recua enter the plain; and, besides, have we not to meet somebody here?"

"That is true, I forgot it."

"And stay, when you speak of the devil—here he is."

The hunters rose quickly, seized their rifles, and hid themselves behind a rock, so as to be ready for any event.

The rapid gallop of a horse became audible, approaching nearer and nearer; ere long a rider emerged from the gorge, and pulled up calmly and haughtily.

The hunters rushed from their ambuscade, and advanced toward him, with the right arm extended, and the palm of the hand open in sign of peace.

The horseman, who was an Indian warrior, responded to these demonstrations by letting his buffalo-robe float out; then he dismounted and shook the hands offered him.

"You are welcome, chief," John said; "we were awaiting you impatiently."

"My pale brothers can look at the sun," the Indian answered; "Blue-fox is punctual."

"That is true, chief; there is nothing to be said."

"Time waits for no man; warriors are not women; Blue-fox would like to hold a council."

"Be it so," John went on; "your observation is just, chief, so let us deliberate; I am anxious to come to a definitive understanding with you."

The Indian bowed gravely to the speaker, sat down, lit his pipe, and began smoking with evident pleasure; the hunters took seats by his side, and, like him, remained silent during the whole period their tobacco lasted.

At length the chief shook the ashes out of the bowl.

At the same instant a detonation was heard, and a bullet cut away a branch just over the chief's head.

The three men leaped to their feet, and seizing their arms, prepared bravely to repulse the enemies who attacked them so suddenly.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PANTHER-KILLER.

BETWEEN the Larch-tree hacienda and the Venta del Potrero, just half-way between the two places, or at about forty miles from either, two men were sitting on the banks of a nameless stream, and conversing, as they supped on pemmican and a few boiled *camotes*.

These two men were Tranquil and Quoniam.

About fifty yards from them, in a copse of brambles and shrubs, a young colt about two months old was fastened to the trunk of a gigantic catalpa. The poor animal, after making vain efforts to break the cord that held it, had at length recognised the inutility of its attempts, and had sorrowfully laid down on the ground.

The two men had now reached the second half of life. Although age had got but a slight grasp on their iron bodies, a few grey hairs were beginning to silver the hunter's scalp, and wrinkles furrowed his face.

Still, with the exception of these slight marks, which serve as a seal to ripened age, nothing denoted any weakening in the Canadian; on the contrary, his eye was still bright, his body equally straight, and his limbs just as muscular.

As for the negro, no apparent change had taken place in him, and he seemed as young as ever; he had merely grown lustier.

The spot where the two wood-rangers had camped was certainly one of the most picturesque on the prairie.

The midnight breeze had swept the sky, whose dark blue vault seemed studded with innumerable spangles of diamonds, in the midst of which the southern cross shone; the moon poured forth its white rays, which imparted to objects a fantastic appearance; the night had that velvety transparence peculiar to twilight; at each gust of wind the trees shook their damp heads, and rained a shower, which pattered on the shrubs.

The river flowed on calmly between its wooded banks, looking in the distance like a silver riband, and reflecting in its peaceful mirror the trembling rays of the moon.

So great was the silence of the desert, that the fall of a withered leaf, or the rustling of a branch, could be heard.

The two men were conversing in a low voice; but singularly enough with men so habituated to desert life, their night encampment, instead of being, according to the invariable rules of the prairie, situate on the top of a hillock, was placed on the slope that descended gently to the river.

In spite of the sharp cold of night, and the icy dew which made them tremble, the hunters had lit no fire; still they would assuredly have derived great comfort from warming their limbs over the genial flames; the negro especially, who was lightly attired in drawers that left his legs uncovered, and a fragment of a zarapé, full of holes, was trembling all over.

Tranquil, who was more warmly attired in the garb of Mexican campesinos, did not appear to notice the cold; with his rifle between his legs, he gazed out into the darkness, or listened to any sound perceptible to him alone, while he talked to the negro, disdaining to notice either his grimaces or the chattering of his teeth.

"So," he said, "you did not see the little one to-day?"

"No, no, I have not seen her for two days," the negro answered.

The Canadian sighed.

"I ought to have gone myself," he went on; "the girl is very solitary there, especially now that war has let loose on this side all the border ruffians."

"Nonsense! Carmela has beak and nails; she would not hesitate to defend herself if insulted."

"Confusion!" the Canadian exclaimed, "if one of those *Malvados* dared to say a word——"

"Do not trouble yourself thus, Tranquil; you know very well that if any one ventured to insult the *Querida Nina*, she would not want for defenders. Besides, *Lanzi* never leaves her for a moment."

"Yes," the hunter muttered, "but *Lanzi* is only a man after all."

"You drive me to desperation with the ideas which so unreasonably get into your head."

"I love the girl, *Quoniam*."

"Hang it, and I love her too, the little darling! Well, if you like, after we have killed the jaguar, we will go to the *Potrero*—does that suit you?"

"It is a long way from here."

"Nonsense! three hours' ride. By-the-bye, Tranquil, do you know that it is cold? and I am getting literally frozen; cursed animal! I wonder what it is doing at this moment; I daresay it is amusing itself."

"Hang it all! perhaps it suspects what we have in store for it."

"That is possible, for those confounded animals are so cunning. Hilloah! the colt is quivering—it has certainly scented something."

The Canadian turned his head.

"No, not yet," he said.

"We shall have a night of it," the negro muttered.

"You will ever be the same, Quoniam—impatient and headstrong. Whatever I may tell you, you obstinately refuse to understand me; how many times have I repeated to you that the jaguar is one of the most cunning animals in existence? although we are to windward, I feel convinced it has scented us. It is prowling cunningly around us, and afraid to come too near us."

"Hum! do you think it will carry on that game much longer?"

"No, because it must be beginning to grow thirsty! three feelings are struggling in it at this moment—hunger, thirst, and fear; fear will prove the weakest, you may be assured; and it is only a question of time."

"I can see it; for nearly four hours we have been on the watch."

"Patience; the worst is over, and we shall soon have some news, I feel assured."

"May heaven hear you, for I am dying of cold; is it a large animal?"

"Yes, its prints are wide, but, if I am not greatly mistaken, it has paired."

"Do you think so?"

"I could almost bet it, it is impossible for a single jaguar to do so much mischief in less than a week."

"In that case," Quoniam said, rubbing his hands gleefully, "we shall have a fine hunt."

"That is what I suppose; and it must have whelps to come so near the hacienda."

At this moment a hoarse bellowing, bearing some slight resemblance to the miauling of a cat, troubled the profound silence of the desert.

"There is its first cry," said Quoniam.

"It is still a long way off."

"Oh, it will soon come nearer."

"Not yet; it is not after us at this moment."

"Who else, then?"

"Listen."

A similar cry to the first, but coming from the opposite side, burst forth at this moment.

"Did I not tell you," the Canadian continued, quietly, "that it had paired?"

"I did not doubt it. If you do not know the habits of tigers, who should?"

The poor colt had risen; it was trembling all over, and with its head buried between its front legs, it was standing up and uttering little plaintive cries.

Two louder roars burst forth almost simultaneously.

"The beast is thirsty," Tranquil remarked; "its anger is aroused, and it is coming nearer."

"Good! shall we get ready?"

"Wait a while, our enemies are hesitating; they have not yet reached that paroxysm of rage which makes them forget all prudence."

The negro sat down again philosophically.

A few minutes passed thus. At intervals the night breeze, laden with uncertain rumour, passed over the hunters' heads, and was lost in the distance like a sigh.

They were calm and motionless, with the eye fixed on space, the ear open to the mysterious noises of the desert, the finger on the rifle-trigger, ready at the first signal to face the still invisible foe, whose approach and imminent attack they, however, instinctively divined.

All at once the Canadian started, and stooped down to the ground.

"Oh!" he said, as he rose with marks of terrible anxiety, "what is taking place in the forest?"

The roar of the tiger burst forth like a clap of thunder.

A horrible shriek responded to it, and the wild gallop of a horse was heard, approaching at headlong speed.

"Quick! quick!" Tranquil shouted, "some one is in danger of death—the tiger is on his trail."

The two hunters rushed intrepidly in the direction of the roars.

The whole forest seemed quivering; nameless sounds issued from the hidden lairs, resembling at one moment mocking laughter, at another cries of agony.

The hoarse miauling of the jaguars went on uninterruptedly. The gallop of the horses which the hunters heard at first seemed multiplied and issuing from opposite points.

The panting hunters still ran on in a straight line, bounding over ravines and morasses with wonderful speed; the terror they felt for the strangers whom they wished to help gave them wings.

Suddenly a shriek of agony, still louder and more despairing, was heard a short distance off.

"Oh!" Tranquil shouted, in a paroxysm of madness, "it is she! it is Carmela!"

And, bounding like a wild beast, he rushed forward, followed by Quoniam, who, during the whole wild race, had never left him a hair's breadth.

Suddenly a deadly silence fell over the desert—every noise, every rumour, ceased as if by enchantment, and nothing could be heard save the panting of the hunters.

A furious roar uttered by the tigers burst forth; a crashing of branches agitated an adjoining thicket, and an enormous mass, bounding from the top of the tree, passed over the Canadian's head and disappeared; at the same instant a flash burst through the gloom and a shot was heard, answered almost immediately by a roar of agony and a shriek of horror.

"Courage, Nina, courage!" a masculine voice exclaimed, a short distance off, "you are saved!"

The hunters, by a supreme effort of their will, increased their speed, which was already incredible, and at length entered the scene of action.

A strange and terrible sight then offered itself to their horror-stricken gaze.

In a small clearing a fainting woman was stretched out on the ground, by the side of a ripped-up horse, which was struggling in the final convulsions.

This female was motionless, and appeared dead.

Two young tigers, crouching like cats, fixed their ardent eyes upon her, and were preparing to attack her; a few paces further on a wounded tiger was writhing on the ground with horrid roars, and trying to leap on a man, who, with one knee on the ground, with his left arm enveloped in the numerous folds of a zarapé, and the right armed with a long machete, was resolutely awaiting its attack.

Behind the man, a horse, with outstretched neck, smoking nostrils and laid-back ears, was quivering with terror, while a second tiger, posted on the largest branch of a larch tree, fixed its burning glances on the dismounted rider, while lashing the air with its tail, and uttering hoarse miauls.

While Quoniam leaped on the tiger cubs, and seizing them by the scurf, dashed their brains out against a rock, Tranquil shouldered his rifle, and killed the tigress at the moment when she was leaping on the horseman. Then turning with marvellous speed he killed the second tiger with the butt of his rifle, and laid it stiff at his feet.

"Ah!" the hunter said, with a feeling of pride, as he rested his rifle on the ground, and wiped his forehead, which was bathed in a cold perspiration.

"She lives!" Quoniam shouted, who understood what agony his friend's exclamation contained; "fear alone made her faint, but she is otherwise unhurt."

The hunter slowly took off his cap, and raised his eyes to heaven.

"Thanks, O God!" he murmured.

In the meanwhile, the horseman, so miraculously saved by Tranquil, had walked up to him.

"I will do the same for you, some day," he said.

"It is I who am your debtor," the hunter answered, frankly; "had it not been for your sublime devotion, I should have arrived too late."

"I have done no more than another in my place."

"Perhaps so. Your name, brother?"

"Loyal Heart. Yours?"

"Tranquil. We are friends for life and death."

"I accept, brother. And now let us attend to this poor girl."

The two men shook hands for a second time, and went up to Carmela, on whom Quoniam was lavishing every imaginable attention, though unable to recall her from the profound faint into which she had fallen.

While Tranquil and Loyal Heart took the negro's place, the latter hastily collected a few dried branches and lit a fire.

After a few minutes, however, Carmela faintly opened her eyes, and was soon sufficiently recovered to explain the cause of her presence in the forest, instead of being quietly asleep in the Venta del Potrero.

This story we will tell the reader in the next chapter.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LANZI.

CARMELA watched for a long time the Jaguar's irregular ride across country, and when he at length disappeared in the distance, in a clump of pine trees, she sadly bowed her head and re-entered the venta.

"He hates him," she murmured, in a low voice; "he hates him. Will he be willing to save him?"

She fell into an equipal, and for some minutes remained plunged in a deep reverie.

At last she raised her head; a feverish flush covered her face, and her soft eyes seemed to emit flashes.

"I will save him!" she exclaimed, with supreme resolution.

After this exclamation she rose, and walking hurriedly across the room, opened the door leading into the corral.

"Lanzi?" she cried.

"Nina?" the half-breed replied, who was engaged at this moment in giving their alfalfa to two valuable horses belonging to the young lady, which were under his special charge.

"Come here."

"I will be with you in a moment."

Five minutes later at the most he appeared.

"What do you want, senorita?" he said, with that calm obsequiousness habitual to servants who are spoiled by their masters; "I am very busy at this moment."

"That is possible, my good Lanzi," she answered; "but what I have to say to you admits of no delay."

"Oh, oh," he said, in a slightly surprised tone; "what is the matter, then?"

"Nothing very extraordinary, my good man; everything in the venta is regular as usual. But I have a service to ask of you."

"Speak, senorita; you know that I am devoted to you."

"It is growing late, and it is probable that no traveller will arrive at the venta to-day."

The half-breed raised his head, and mentally calculated the position of the sun.

"I do not believe that any travellers will arrive to-day," he at length said, "for it is nearly four o'clock; still, they might come for all that."

"Well, I wish you to shut up the venta."

"Shut up the venta! What for?"

"I will tell you."

"Is it really very important?"

"Very."

"Speak, then, Nina; I am all ears."

The maiden gave the half-breed, who was standing in front of her, a long and searching glance, leant her elbow gracefully on the table, and said, quietly—

"I am anxious, Lanzi."

"Anxious? What about?"

"At my father's long absence."

"Why, he was here hardly four days back."

"He never left me alone so long before."

"Still," the half-breed remarked—

"In a word," she interrupted him, resolutely, "I am anxious about my father, and wish to see him. You will close the venta, saddle the horses, and we will go to the Larch-tree hacienda; it is not far, and we shall be back in four or five hours."

The half-breed bowed without replying, for he knew that when his young mistress spoke thus he must obey.

The maiden walked forward a step, laid her white and delicate hand on the half-breed's shoulder, and putting her lovely face close to his, she added, with a gentle smile which made the poor fellow start with joy—

"Do not be vexed at my whim, my kind Lanzi, but I am suffering."

"Be vexed with you, Nina!" the half-breed answered with a significant shrug of his shoulders; "why, do you not know that I would go into the fire for you? much more, then, would I satisfy your slightest wish."

He then began carefully barricading the doors and windows of the venta, after which he proceeded to the corral to saddle the horses, while Carmela, suffering from nervous impatience, changed her attire for other clothes more convenient for the journey she designed, for she had deceived the old servant. It was not Tranquil she wished to find.

But Heaven had decreed that the plan she revolved in her pretty head should not succeed.

At the moment when she re-entered the sitting-room, fully dressed, Lanzi appeared in the doorway of the corral with extreme agitation displayed on his face.

Carmela ran up to him eagerly, fancying that he had hurt himself.

"What is the matter with you?" she asked him, kindly.

"We are lost!" he replied, in a hollow voice.

"Lost!" she exclaimed, turning pallid as a corpse; "what do you mean?"

The half-breed laid a finger on his lip to command silence, made her a sign to follow him, and glided noiselessly into the corral.

Carmela followed him.

The corral was enclosed with a plank wall about six feet high; Lanzi went up to a spot where a wide cleft allowed a prospect of the plain.

"Look," he said to his mistress.

The girl obeyed, and laid her face against the plank.

Night was beginning to fall, and a denser shadow was each moment invading the plain. Still, the obscurity was not great enough to prevent Carmela distinguishing, about two hundred yards away, a numerous party of horsemen coming at full speed in the direction of the venta.

A glance sufficed the maiden to perceive that these horsemen were *Indios bravos*.

The warriors, more than fifty in number, were in their full war-paint.

"These are Apaches," Carmela exclaimed, as she recoiled in terror. "How comes it that they have reached this place before we are warned?"

The half-breed shook his head sadly.

"In a few minutes they will be here," he said; "what is to be done?"

"Defend ourselves!" the maiden replied, bravely; "they do not appear to have fire-arms: we could easily hold out against them till daybreak."

"And then?" the half-breed asked, doubtfully.

"Then," she answered with exaltation, "Heaven will come to our aid."

"Amen!" the half-breed answered.

"Make haste and bring down into the inn-room all the fire-arms we have; perhaps the heathens will fall back if they find themselves hotly received; and, after all, who knows whether they will attack us?"

"Hum! the demons are crafty, and know perfectly well how many persons dwell in this house. Do not expect that they will withdraw."

"Well," she exclaimed, resolutely, "let us trust to Heaven; we shall die bravely fighting, instead of letting ourselves be captured like cowards."

"Be it so, then," the half-breed answered: "we will fight. You know, *senorita*, that a combat does not terrify me. The pagans had better look out, for unless they take care, I may play them a trick they will remember."

This conversation broke off here for the present, owing to the necessity the speakers were under of preparing their means of defence, which they did with a speed and intelligence which proved that this was not the first time they found themselves in so critical a position.

Carmela was not mistaken; it was really a band of Indian braves coming up at a gallop, who soon reached the house, and completely surrounded it.

Usually the Indians in their expeditions proceed with extreme prudence, never showing themselves openly, and only advancing with great circumspection. This time it was easy to see that they believed themselves certain of success, and were perfectly well aware that the venta was stripped of its defenders.

On coming within twenty yards of the venta they stopped, dismounted, and seemed to be consulting.

Lanzi had profited by these few moments of respite to pile on the table all the weapons in the house, consisting of about a dozen rifles.

Although the doors and windows were barred, it was easy to follow the movements of the enemy.

Carmela, armed with a rifle, had intrepidly stationed herself before the door, while the half-breed walked up and down anxiously, going out and coming in again, and apparently giving the last touch to an important and mysterious job.

"There," he said, a moment later, "that is all right; lay that rifle on the table again, *senorita*; we can only conquer those demons by stratagem, not by force, so leave me to act."

"What is your plan?"

"You will see. I have sawn two planks out of the enclosure of the corral; as soon as you hear me open the door, set off at full speed."

"But you?"

"Do not trouble yourself about me, but give your horse the spurs."

"I will not abandon you."

"Nonsense! no folly of that sort; I am old, my life only hangs by a thread, but yours is precious and must be saved; let me alone, I tell you."

"No, unless you tell me."

"I will tell you nothing. You will find Tranquil at the ford of the Venado; not a word more."

"Ah, that is it," she exclaimed; "well, I swear that I will not stir from your side, whatever may happen."

"You are mad; have I not told you I wished to play the Indians a famous trick?"

"Indeed!"

"Well, you will see. As, however, I fear some imprudence on your part, I wish to see you start before me."

"Are you speaking the truth?"

"Of course I am. In five minutes I shall join you."

"Do you promise me, then?"

"Do you fancy I should find any fun in remaining here?"

"What do you intend doing?"

"Here are the Indians; begone, and do not forget to start at full gallop so soon as I open the door of the venta, and ride in the direction of the Venado ford."

"But I expect——"

"Begone, begone," he interrupted; "it is all settled."

The maiden unwillingly obeyed: but at this moment loud blows against the shutters were audible, and the half-breed profited by this demonstration of the Indians to close the door leading into the corral.

"I swore to Tranquil to protect her, whatever might happen," he muttered, "and I can only save her by dying for her. Well, I will die: but, *Capa de Dios*, I will have a fine funeral."

Fresh blows were dealt at the shutters, with such violence it was easy to see they would be soon broken in.

"Who's there?" the half-breed asked quietly.

"*Gente de paz*," was the reply from without.

"Hum!" Lanzi said, "for peaceful people you have a singular way of announcing your presence."

"Open, open!" the voice outside repeated.

"I am very ready to do so, but what proves to me that you do not mean harm?"

"Open, or we will break down the door."

And the blows were renewed.

"Oh, oh," the half-breed said, "you are strong in the arms; do not trouble yourself further."

The blows ceased.

The half-breed unbarred the door, and opened it.

The Indians rushed into the interior with yells and howls of joy.

Lanzi slipped on one side to let them pass; he gave a start of joy on hearing a horse set out at full gallop.

The Indians paid no attention to this incident.

"Drink!" they shouted.

"What would you like to have?"

"Fire-water!" they yelled.

Lanzi hastened to serve them, and the orgie began.

Knowing they had nothing to fear from the inhabitants of the venta, the red-skins had rushed in so soon as the door was opened, without taking the precaution to post sentries; this negligence, on which Lanzi calculated, gave Carmela the opportunity of escaping.

The Apaches have a frenzied passion for strong liquors ; the Comanches alone are teetotalers.

Lanzi followed with a cunning look the evolutions of the red-skins, who crowded round the tables, drank deeply, and emptied the botas placed before them ; their eyes were beginning to sparkle, their features were animated ; they spoke loudly all at once, no longer knowing what they said.

Suddenly the half-breed felt a hand laid on his shoulder.

He turned and found an Indian, with folded arms, in front of him.

"What do you want ?" he asked him.

"Blue-fox is a chief," the Indian answered, "and has to speak with the pale-face."

"Is not Blue-fox satisfied with the way in which I have received him and his companions ?"

"It is not that ; the warriors are drinking, and the chief wants something else."

"Ah," the half-breed said, "I am vexed, for I have given you all I had."

"No," the Indian replied drily.

"How so ?"

"Where is the golden-haired girl ?"

"I do not understand you," the half-breed said.

The Indian smiled.

"The pale-face will look at Blue-fox," he said, "and will then see that he is a chief, and not a child. What has become of the girl with the golden hair, who lives here with my brother ?"

"The person of whom you speak, if you mean the young lady to whom this house belongs——"

"Yes."

"Well, she is not here."

"The pale-face lies," he said.

"Look for her."

"She was here an hour ago."

"That is possible."

"Where is she ?"

"Look."

"The pale-face is a dog whose scalp I will raise."

"Much good may it do you," the half-breed answered.

Unfortunately, while uttering these words, Lanzi gave a triumphant glance in the direction of the corral ; the chief caught it, rushed to the door, and uttered a yell of disappointment on seeing the hole in the palisade ; the truth flashed upon him.

"Dog !" he yelled, and drawing his scalping-knife, he hurled it furiously at his enemy ; but the latter, who was watching him, dodged the missile, which struck into the wall a few inches from his head.

Lanzi leaped over the bar, and rushed away.

The Indians rose tumultuously, and seizing their arms, bounded like wild beasts in pursuit of the half-breed.

The latter, on reaching the door of the corral, turned, fired his pistols among the crowd, leapt on his horse, and burying his spurs in its flanks, forced it to leap through the breach.

At the same moment a horrible noise was heard behind him : the earth trembled, and a confused mass of stones, beams, and fragments of every description fell around the rider and his horse.

The Venta del Potrero was blown into the air, burying beneath its ruins the Apaches who had invaded it.

Such was the trick Lanzi had played on the Indians ; we can now understand why he had insisted on Carmela setting off at full speed.

By a singular piece of good fortune, neither the half-breed nor his horse was wounded ; the mustang, with foaming nostrils, flew over the prairie as if winged, incessantly urged on by its rider, who excited it with spur and voice, for he fancied he could hear behind him the gallop of another horse in pursuit.

Unluckily the night was too dark to assure himself whether he were mistaken.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CHASE.

THE reader will probably consider that the means employed by Lanzi to get rid of the Indians was somewhat violent.

The justification of the half-breed is as simple as it is easy to give ; the Indian braves, when they cross the Mexican border, indulge mercilessly in every possible crime, displaying the greatest cruelty toward the unhappy white men who fall into their hands, and for whom they testify a hatred which nothing can assuage.

Lanzi's position, alone, without help to expect from any one, in an isolated spot, in the power of some fifty demons without faith or law, was most critical ; the more so, as the Apaches, once they had been excited by strong liquors, the abuse of which causes them a species of raving madness, would no longer have recognised any restraint ; their sanguinary character would have regained the upper hand, and they would have indulged in the most unjustifiable cruelty, for the mere pleasure of making an enemy of their race suffer.

The half-breed had, besides, peremptory reasons for behaving thus ; he must, at all risks, ensure Carmela's safety, whom he had solemnly sworn to Tranquil to defend, even at the peril of his own life.

In the present case, he knew that his life or death depended solely on the caprice of the Indians.

Lanzi was a cold, positive, and methodical man, who never acted till he had previously fully weighed the chances of success or failure. Under present circumstances, the half-breed ran no risk, for he knew that he was condemned by the Indians beforehand ; if his plan succeeded, he might possibly escape ; if not, he could die, but as a brave borderer should do, taking with him into the tomb a considerable number of his implacable foes.

His resolution once formed, it was carried out with coolness, and, thanks to his presence of mind, he had found time to leap on his horse and fly.

Still, all was not finished yet, and the galloping half-breed heard behind him disturbed him greatly, by proving to him that his plan had not succeeded so well as he hoped, and that one of his enemies, at any rate, had escaped, and was on his track.

The half-breed redoubled his speed ; he made his horse swerve from the straight line incessantly, in order to throw out his obstinate pursuer ; but everything was of no avail, and still he heard him galloping behind him.

Lanzi, with frowning brow, quivering lips, and forehead bathed with cold perspiration, rode thus forward for several hours across country, bowed over his horse's neck, following no settled course, but constantly pursued by the dry, sharp sound of the horse galloping after him.

Strangely enough, since he first heard this gallop, it had not appeared to draw nearer; it might be thought that the strange horseman, satisfied with following the trail of the man, was not desirous of catching him up.

By degrees the half-breed's excitement calmed: the cold night air restored a little order to his ideas, his coolness returned, and with it the necessary clearness to judge of his position soundly.

Lanzi was ashamed of this puerile terror, so unworthy of a man like himself, which had for so long, through a selfish feeling, caused him to forget the sacred duty he had taken on himself, of protecting and defending at the peril of his life his friend's daughter.

At this thought, which struck him like a thunder-bolt, a burning blush flushed his face, a flash darted from his eyes, and he stopped his horse short.

The horse, suddenly arrested in its stride, uttered a snort of pain, and remained motionless, at the same instant the galloping of the invisible steed ceased.

"Hilloah!" the half-breed muttered, "this is beginning to look ugly."

And drawing a pistol from his belt, he cocked it. He immediately heard, like a funeral echo, the sharp sound of another being cocked by his adversary.

Still, this sound, instead of increasing the half-breed's apprehensions, seemed, on the contrary, to calm them.

"What is the meaning of that?" he asked himself. "Have I not to deal with an Apache?"

After this aside, during which Lanzi sought in vain to distinguish his unknown foe, he shouted—

"Hilloah, who are you?"

"Who are you?" a masculine voice replied, emerging from the darkness.

"That's a singular answer," Lanzi went on.

"Not more singular than the question."

These words were exchanged in excellent Spanish. The half-breed, now certain that he had to deal with a white man, banished all fear, and, uncocking his pistol, returned it to his girdle, as he said, good-humouredly—

"You must feel like myself, caballero, inclined to draw breath after so long a ride; shall we rest together?"

"I wish for nothing better," the other answered.

"Why," a voice exclaimed, which the half-breed at once recognised, "it is Lanzi."

"Certainly," the latter shouted, joyfully. "*Voto à brios*, Dona Carmela, I did not hope to meet you here."

The three persons joined, and the explanations were ended; fear does not calculate. Dona Carmela on one side, Lanzi on the other, filled with a vague terror, fled without attempting to account for the feeling that impelled them, exerted only by the instinct of self-preservation.

The only difference was, that the half-breed believed himself pursued by the Apaches, while Dona Carmela supposed them ahead of her.

When the young lady left the venta, she rode blindly along the first path that presented itself.

Heaven willed it for her happiness that at the moment the house blew up with a terrible crash, Dona Carmela, half dead with fear, and thrown from her horse, was found by a white hunter, who, moved with pity at the recital of the dangers that menaced her, generously offered to escort her to the Larch-tree hacienda.

Dona Carmela, after taking a scrutinising glance at the hunter, whose honest look and open face were proofs of his loyalty, gratefully accepted his offer, fearing, as she did, that she might fall, in the darkness, among the Indian bands which were doubtless infesting the roads.

The maiden and her guide set out therefore at once for the hacienda, but affected

by numberless apprehensions, the gallop of the half-breed's horse made them believe a party of the enemy ahead of them, hence they had kept far enough behind to be able to turn and fly at the slightest suspicious movement.

This explanation did away with all alarm, and Carmela and Lanzi were delighted at having met.

While the half-breed was telling his young mistress in what way he had disposed of the Apaches, the hunter, like a prudent man, had taken the horses by the bridle and led them into a thick coppice. He then returned to his new friends, who had seated themselves on the ground, to enjoy a few moments' rest.

At this moment, when the hunter returned, Lanzi was saying to his mistress—

"Why, senorita, should you fatigue yourself further this night? Our new friend and I will build you a jacal, under which you will be famously sheltered; you will sleep till sunrise, and then we can start for the hacienda. For the present you have no danger to fear, as you are protected by two men who will not hesitate to sacrifice their lives if necessary."

"I thank you, my good Lanzi," the young lady answered; "your devotion is known to me, and I could not hesitate to trust to you if I were at this moment affected by fear of the Apaches. Believe me, that the thought of the perils I may have to incur from those pagans goes for nothing in my determination to start."

"What more important consideration can compel you, then, senorita?" the half-breed asked, in surprise.

"That is an affair between my father and myself; it is sufficient for you to know that I must see him to-night."

"Be it so; as you wish it, senorita, I consent," the half-breed said; "still, you must allow that it is a very strange caprice on your part."

"No, my good Lanzi," she answered, sadly, "it is not a caprice; when you know the reasons that cause me to act, I am convinced you will applaud me."

"That is possible; but if that is the case, why not tell me them at once?"

"Because that is impossible."

"Silence!" the hunter interfered; "any discussion is unnecessary, for we must start as soon as we can."

"What do you mean?" they exclaimed.

"The Apaches have found our trail; they are coming up quickly, and will be here within twenty minutes. This time there is no mistake, they are the men."

There was a lengthened silence.

Dona Carmela and Lanzi listened attentively.

"I hear nothing," the half-breed said, presently.

"Nor I," the maiden whispered.

The hunter smiled softly.

"You can hear nothing yet," for your ears are not accustomed, like mine, to catch the slightest sounds from the desert. Put faith in my words, trust to an experience which never was mistaken: your enemies are approaching."

"What is to be done?" Dona Carmela murmured.

"Fly," the half-breed exclaimed.

"Listen," the hunter said, quietly; "the Apaches are numerous, they are cunning, but we can only conquer them by cunning. If we try to resist we are lost; if we fly all three together, sooner or later we shall fall into their hands. While I remain here you will fly with senorita, but be careful to muffle your horses' hoofs."

"But you?" the maiden exclaimed quickly.

"Have I not told you? I shall remain here."

"Oh, in that case you will fall into the hands of the pagans, and be inevitably massacred."

"Perhaps so," he replied with an indescribable expression of sadness; "but at any rate my death will be of some service, as it will save you."

"Very well," said Lanzi; "I thank you for your offer, caballero; unhappily, I cannot, and will not, accept it. I began the affair, and insist on ending it in my own way. Go away with the senorita, deliver her into her father's hands, and if you do not see me again, and he asks what has happened to me, tell him simply that I kept my promise."

"I will never consent," Dona Carmela exclaimed.

"Silence!" the half-breed hastily interrupted her; "be off, you have not a moment to lose."

In spite of the young lady's resistance, he raised her in his muscular arms, and ran off with her into the thicket.

Carmela understood that nothing could change the half-breed's resolution, so she yielded to him.

The hunter accepted Lanzi's devotion as simply as he offered his own, for the half-breed's conduct appeared to him perfectly natural.

"Now begone," the half-breed said, so soon as the hunter and the maiden had mounted; "go, and may heaven be merciful to you!"

"And you, my friend?" Dona Carmela remarked sadly.

"I?" he answered with a careless toss of his head; "the red devils have not got me yet. Come, be off."

To cut short the conversation, the half-breed lashed the horses with his chicote; the noble animals started.

So soon as he was alone, the poor fellow gave vent to a sigh. "Hum!" he muttered sadly; "this time I am very much afraid that it is all up with me; no matter; canarios, I will fight to the last." After forming this heroic resolution, the worthy man mounted his horse and prepared for action.

The Apaches dashed up with a noise resembling thunder.

The black outlines could already be distinguished through the darkness.

Lanzi took the bridle between his teeth, seized a pistol in either hand, and when he judged the moment propitious, he dug his spurs into his horse, dashed out in front of the red-skins, and crossed their front diagonally.

When within range, he fired his pistols into the group, gave a yell of defiance, and continued his flight.

What the half-breed expected, really happened. His shots had told, and two Apaches fell with their chests pierced through and through. The Indians, furious at this audacious attack, which they were far from expecting from a single man, uttered a cry of fury, and dashed after him. This was exactly what Lanzi wanted.

"There," he said; "they are altogether now, and there is no fear of their scattering; the others are saved. As for me—bah, who knows?"

Dona Carmela and the hunter only escaped from the Apaches to fall in with the jaguars.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CONFESSION.

IKANQUIL attentively listened to the girl's story with drooping head and frowning brows; when she had finished, he looked at her a moment inquiringly.

"Is that all?" he asked her.

"All," she answered timidly.

"And Lanzi, my poor Lanzi, have you no news of him?"

"None. We heard two shots, the furious galloping of several horses, the war-cry of the Apaches, and then all became silent again."

"What can have become of him?" he muttered sadly.

"He is resolute, and seems to me conversant with desert life," Loyal Heart said.

"Yes," Tranquil replied, "but he is alone."

"That is true," said the hunter; "alone against fifty, perhaps."

"Oh, I would give ten years of my life," the Canadian exclaimed, "to have some news of him."

"Carai, gossip," a merry voice replied; "I have brought you some all fresh, and shall charge you nothing for them."

The hearers started as the branches parted, and a man appeared.

It was Lanzi.

The half-breed seemed as calm and composed as if nothing extraordinary had happened to him; but his face, usually so cold, now had an indescribable expression of cunning joy, his eyes sparkled, and a mocking smile played about his lips.

"By Jove! our friend," Tranquil said, as he offered him a hand; "you are a thousand times welcome."

"Thank you; but, luckily for me, the danger was not so imminent as might be supposed, and I very easily succeeded in getting rid of the Apaches."

"All the better; no matter how you contrived to escape, here you are safe and sound, so all is for the best; now that we have met again, they may come if their heart tells them to do so, and they will find somebody to talk to them."

"They will not do it; besides, they have something else on hand at this moment."

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it; they perceived the bivouac of Mexican soldiers escorting a *conducta de plata*, and are naturally trying to get hold of it; it was partly to that fortuitous circumstance I owe my safety."

"On my word! all the worse for the Mexicans," the Canadian said carelessly; "every man for himself; let them settle matters as they think proper."

"That is my opinion too."

"We have still three hours of night; let us profit by them to rest."

"The advice is good, and should be followed," said Lanzi, who immediately lay down with his feet to the fire, wrapped himself in his zarapé, and closed his eyes.

Loyal Heart, who doubtless shared his opinion, followed his example.

As for Quoniam, after conscientiously flaying the tigers and their cubs, he lay down in front of the fire, and for the last two hours had been sleeping with that careless indifference so characteristic of the black race.

Tranquil then turned to Carmela. The maiden was seated a few paces from him; she was gazing into the fire pensively, and tears stood in her eyes.

"Well, daughter mine," the Canadian said to her softly, "what are you doing there? why not try to get a few minutes' rest?"

"For what good?" she asked sorrowfully.

"What do you mean?" Tranquil asked sharply; "why, to regain your strength of course."

"Let me remain awake, father; I could not sleep, however tired I might feel; sleep will fly my eye-lids."

The Canadian examined her for a moment with the greatest attention.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked.

"Nothing, father," she replied, as she tried to force a smile.

"Girl, girl" he muttered, "all this is not quite clear; I am only a poor hunter,

very ignorant of matters of the world, and my mind is simple ; but I love you, child, and my heart tells me you are suffering."

"I?" she exclaimed in denial ; but all at once she burst into tears, hid her face in his bosom, and murmured in a choking voice—

"Oh, father, father, I am so wretched."

Tranquil, at this exclamation, torn from her by the force of pain, started as if a serpent had stung him ; his eye sparkled, he gave the girl a look full of paternal love, and compelled her with gentle constraint to look him in the face.

"Wretched? you, Carmela?" he exclaimed anxiously. "Great Heaven! what has happened then?"

By a supreme effort, the maiden succeeded in calming herself ; her features re-assumed their ordinary tranquillity, she wiped away her tears, and smiled at the hunter, who anxiously watched her.

"Pardon me, father," she said ; "I am mad."

"No, no," he replied, shaking his head ; "you are not mad, my child, but are concealing something."

"Father!" she said with a blush, and looked down in confusion.

"Be frank with me, child, for am I not your best friend?"

"That is true," she stammered.

"Listen, Carmela ; while telling us a little while back what happened to-day at the venta, you confessed yourself that you wished to find me, no matter where I was, this very night ; is that so?"

"Yes, father."

"Well, here I am, I am listening to you ; besides, if what you have to say to me is so important as you led me to suppose, you will do well to make haste."

The maiden started ; she gave a glance at the sky, where the gloom was beginning to be intersected by white stripes.

"You are right, father," she said, in a firm voice ; "I have to speak with you about an affair of the greatest importance, and perhaps I have deferred it too long, for it is a question of life and death."

"Speak, child, speak, without fear, and reckon on my affection for you."

"I do so, my kind father, so you shall know all."

"It is well."

Dona Carmela seemed to collect herself for a moment, then, letting her dainty hand fall into her father's rough and large hand, while her long silken lashes drooped timidly, to serve as a veil to her eyes, she began in a weak voice at first, which, however, soon became more firm and distinct.

"Lanzi told you that meeting with a *conducta de plata* encamped a short distance from here helped him to escape from the pursuit of the pagans. Father, this *conducta* spent last night at the venta, and the captain who commands the escort is one of the most distinguished officers in the Mexican army ; you have heard him spoken of before now in terms of praise, and I even think you are personally acquainted with him ; his name is Don Juan Melendez de Gongora."

"Ah!" said Tranquil.

The maiden stopped, all palpitating.

"Go on," the Canadian said, gently.

Carmela gave him a side glance ; as the tigrero was smiling, she resolved to continue.

"Already accident has brought the captain several times to the venta ; he is a true caballero—gentle, polite, honourable, and we have never had the slightest ground of complaint against him."

"I am convinced of it, my child, for Captain Melendez is exactly what you describe him."

"Is he not?" she quickly asked.

"Yes, he is a true caballero; unfortunately, there are not many officers like him in the Mexican army."

"This morning the conducta set out, escorted by the captain; two or three ill looking fellows, who remained at the venta, watched the soldiers depart with a cunning smile, then sat down, began drinking, and saying to me things a girl ought not to hear."

"Ah!" Tranquil interrupted her, with a frown, "do you know the scoundrels?"

"No, father; they are border ruffians, like those of whom there are too many about here; but I do not know their names."

"No matter, I will discover them, you may feel assured."

"Oh, father, you would do wrong to trouble yourself about that."

"Very well, that is my business."

"Fortunately for me, while this was occurring, a horseman arrived, whose presence was sufficient to impose silence on these men, and force them to become what they should always have been, that is to say, polite and respectful to me."

"Of course," the Canadian remarked, laughingly, "this caballero was a friend of yours?"

"Only an acquaintance, father," she said, with a slight blush.

"Ah! very good."

"But he is a great friend of yours—at least, I suppose so."

"Hum! and pray do you know *his* name, my child?"

"Of course," she replied quickly.

"And what is it, may I ask, if you have no objection to tell me."

"None at all; he is called the Jaguar."

"Oh, oh!" the hunter continued, with a frown; "what could he have to do at the venta?"

"I do not know, father; but he said a few words in a low voice to the men of whom I have told you, who immediately left the talk, mounted their horses, and started at a gallop."

"That is strange," the Canadian muttered.

There was a rather lengthened silence; Tranquil was deep in thought, and was evidently seeking the solution of a problem which appeared to him very difficult to solve.

At length he raised his head.

"Is that all you have to tell me?" he asked the girl; "up to the present I see nothing very extraordinary in all you have told me."

"Although the Jaguar spoke in a low voice with these men, through some words I overheard, without wishing to do so, I assure you, father—"

"I am fully persuaded of that. What did you guess from these few words?"

"I mean, I fancied I understood—"

"It is the same thing; go on."

"I fancied I understood, I say, that they were speaking of the conducta."

"And very naturally of Captain Melendez, eh?"

"I am certain that they mentioned his name."

"That is it. Then you supposed that the Jaguar intended to attack the conducta, and possibly kill the captain, eh?"

"I do not say that," the maiden stammered.

"No, but you fear it."

"Good Heavens, father!" she went on, in a tone of vexation, "is it not natural that I should take an interest in a brave officer who—"

"It is most natural, my child, and I do not blame you; even more, I fancy that your suppositions are very near the truth."

"Do you think so, father," she exclaimed.

"It is probable," the Canadian quietly answered; "but reassure yourself, my child," he added kindly; "although you have perhaps delayed too long in speaking to me, I may yet manage to avert the danger which is now suspended over the head of the man in whom you take such interest."

"Oh do so, father, I implore you."

"I will try, at any rate, my child; that is all I can promise; but what do you purpose doing?"

"I?"

"Yes, while my comrades and I are trying to save the captain."

"I will follow you, father, if you will let me."

"I think that is the most prudent course; but you must feel a great affection for the captain that you so ardently desire to save him?"

"I, father?" she replied with the most perfect frankness, "not the least; it only seems to me terrible that so brave an officer should be killed, when there is a chance of saving him."

"Then you hate the Jaguar, of course?"

"Not at all, father; in spite of his violent character, he seems to me a noble-hearted man—the more so, because he possesses your esteem, which is the most powerful reason with me: still, it grieves me to see two men opposed who, I feel convinced, if they knew each other, would become fast friends, and I do not wish blood to be shed between them."

These words were uttered by the maiden with such simple frankness, that for some moments the Canadian remained completely stunned; the slight gleam of light he fancied he had found suddenly deserted him again, though it was impossible for him to say in what manner it had disappeared; he neither understood Dona Carmela's behaviour nor the motives on which she acted.

After looking attentively at the maiden for some time, he shook his head twice or thrice, like a man completely at sea, and without adding a word, aroused his comrades.

Tranquil was one of the most experienced wood-rangers in North America; all the secrets of the desert were known to him, but he was ignorant of the first word of that mystery which is called a woman's heart—a mystery the more difficult to fathom, because women themselves are nearly always ignorant of it; for they only act under the impression of the moment, under the influence of passion, and without premeditation.

In a few words the Canadian explained his plans to his comrades; the latter, as he anticipated, did not offer the slightest objection, but prepared to follow him.

Ten minutes later they mounted and left their bivouac.

At the moment when they disappeared in the forest the owl uttered his matutinal cry, the precursor of sunrise.

"Oh, Heavens!" the maiden murmured in agony, "shall we arrive in time?"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE JAGUAR.

THE Jaguar, when he left the venta, was suffering from extreme agitation; the maiden's words buzzed in his ears with a mocking and ironical accent; the last look she had given him pursued him like a remorse. The young man was angry

with himself for having so hastily broken off the interview with Dona Carmela, and dissatisfied with the way in which he had responded to her entreaties; in short, he was in the best possible temper to commit one of those acts of cruelty into which the violence of his character only too often led him, and which he always bitterly regretted having committed, when it was too late.

He rode across the prairie, lacerating the sides of his horse, uttering stifled maledictions, and casting around the glances of a wild beast in search of prey.

For a moment he entertained the idea of returning to the venta, throwing himself at the maiden's feet, and repairing the fault which his growing jealousy had forced him to commit.

But, like most good resolutions, this one lasted no longer than a lightning flash. The Jaguar reflected, and with reflection doubt and jealousy returned.

The young man galloped on thus for a long time, apparently following no settled direction; still, at intervals he stopped, rose in his stirrups, explored the plain, and then started off again at full speed.

At about three in the afternoon he passed the *conducta de plata*, but as he perceived it a long way off, it was easy for him to avoid it by swerving slightly to the right, and entering a thick wood of pines trees, which rendered him invisible.

About an hour before sunset, the young man, who had perhaps stopped a hundred times to explore the neighbourhood, uttered a suppressed cry of joy; he had at length come up to the persons he was so anxious to join.

Not five hundred yards from the spot where the Jaguar had halted, a band of thirty to five and thirty horsemen were following the track that led across the prairie.

This band, entirely composed of white men, as could be easily seen from their costume, appeared to assume something of a military air, and all were fully equipped.

At the beginning of this story we mentioned some horsemen just disappearing on the horizon; these were the men the Jaguar had just perceived.

The young man placed his open hands to his mouth in the shape of a speaking trumpet, and twice gave a sharp, shrill, and prolonged cry.

Although the troop was some distance off at the moment, still at this signal the riders stopped suddenly.

The Jaguar had bent over his saddle, leaped his horse over the bushes, and in a few minutes joined the men.

The Jaguar was hailed with shouts of joy, and all pressed round him with marks of the deepest interest.

"Thanks, my friends," he said, "thanks for the proofs of sympathy you give me; but I must ask you to give me a moment's attention, for time presses."

Silence was re-established, and as if by enchantment, but the flashing glances fixed on the young man said clearly that sympathy was not the less vivid.

"You were not mistaken, Master John," the Jaguar said, "the *conducta* is just behind us; we are not more than three or four hours' march ahead of it; as you warned me, it is escorted, and the escort is command by Captain Melendez."

His audience gave a start of disappointment.

"Patience," the Jaguar went on, with a sarcastic smile; "when force is not sufficient, stratagem remains; Captain Melendez is brave and experienced, I grant you, but are we not also brave men?"

"Yes, yes, hurrah, hurrah!" all the hearers shouted, as they brandished their weapons enthusiastically.

"Master John, you have already entered into relations with the captain; he knows you, so you will remain here with another of our friends. Allow yourselves to be arrested. I entrust to you the duty of removing the suspicions that may exist in the captain's mind."

"I will do it, you may be certain."

"Very good, but play close with him ; for you have a strong opponent."

"Do you think so ?"

"Yes. Do you know who accompanies him ?"

"On my word, no."

"El Padre Antonio."

"What's that you say ? by Jove, you did right to warn me."

"I thought so."

"Oh, oh ! does that accursed monk wish to poach on our manor ?"

"I fear it. This man, as you know, is affiliated with all the scamps who prowl about the desert : he is even reported to be one of their chiefs ; the idea of seizing the conducta may have occurred to him."

"By Heaven, I will watch him ; trust to me, I know him too thoroughly and too long for him to care to oppose me."

"That is all right. When you have obtained all the information we require to act, lose not a moment in informing us."

"That is settled. I suppose we meet at the Barranca del Gyante."

"Yes."

"One word more."

"Shall I treat with Blue-fox ? You know but little reliance is to be placed in the word of an Apache."

"That is true," the young man answered, thoughtfully ; "still, our position is at this moment most difficult. We are left to our own resources ; our friends hesitate, and dare not yet decide in our favour ; while, on the other hand, our enemies are raising their heads, regaining courage, and preparing to attack us vigorously. Although my heart heaves against such an alliance, it is still evident to me, that if the Apaches consent frankly to help us, their assistance will be very useful to us."

"You are right. In our present situation, outlawed by society, it would, perhaps, be imprudent to reject the alliance of the red-skins."

"Well, my friend, I give you full liberty, and events must guide you. I trust entirely to your intelligence and devotion."

The Jaguar gave a parting nod to his friend or accomplice, whichever the reader pleases to call him, placed himself at the head of the band, and started at a gallop.

"This John was no other than John Davis, the slave-dealer. How it is we find him in Texas, forming part of a band of outlaws, and become the pursued instead of the pursuer, would be too long to explain at this moment. We propose eventually to give the reader full satisfaction on the point.

John and his comrades let themselves be apprehended by Captain Melendez' scouts, without offering the slightest opposition. We have already described how they behaved in the Mexican camp ; so we will follow the Jaguar at present.

The young man seemed to be, and really was, the chief of the horsemen at whose head he rode.

These individuals all belonged to the Anglo-Saxon race, and to a man were North Americans.

For the moment they were insurgents ; most of them came to Texas at the period when the Mexican government authorised American immigration. They had settled in the country, colonised it, and cleared it ; in a word, they ended by regarding it as a new country.

When the Mexican government inaugurated that system of vexations, which it never gave up again, these worthy fellows laid down the pick and the spade to take up the Kentucky rifle, mounted their horses, and broke out into overt insurrection against an oppressor who wished to ruin and dispossess them.

Several bands of insurgents were thus hastily formed on various points of the Texan territory, fighting bravely against the Mexicans wherever they met with them.

Unfortunately for them, however, these hands were isolated; no tie existed among them to form a compact and dangerous whole; they obeyed chiefs, independent one of the other, who all wished to command, without bowing their own will to a supreme and single will.

The horsemen we have brought on the stage were placed under the orders of the Jaguar, whose reputation for courage, skill, and prudence was too firmly established in the country for his name not to inspire terror in the enemies whom chance might bring him across.

The Jaguar was just the chief these men required. He was young, handsome, and gifted with that fascination which improvises kingdoms; he spoke little, but each of his words left a reminiscence.

He understood what his comrades expected of him, and had achieved prodigies; for, as ever happens with a man born for great things, who rises proportionately and ever remains on a level with events, his position, by extending, had, as it were, enlarged his intellect; his glance had become infallible, his will of iron; he identified himself so thoroughly with his new position, that he no longer allowed himself to be mastered by any human feeling. His face seemed of marble, both in joy and sorrow. The enthusiasm of his comrades could produce neither flame nor smile on his countenance.

The Jaguar was not an ordinary ambitious man; he was grieved by the disagreement among the insurgents; he most heartily desired a fusion, which had become indispensable, and laboured with all his might to effect it; in a word, the young man had faith; he believed; for, in spite of the innumerable faults committed since the beginning of the insurrection by the Texans, he found such vitality in the work of liberty hitherto so badly managed, that he learned at length that in every human question there is something more powerful than force, than courage, even than genius, and that this something is the idea whose time has come, whose hour has struck by the clock of Deity.

In order to neutralise, as far as possible, the isolation in which his band was left, the Jaguar had inaugurated certain tactics which had hitherto proved successful. What he wanted was to gain time, and perpetuate the war, even though waging an unequal contest. For this purpose he was obliged to envelop his weakness in mystery, show himself everywhere, stop nowhere, enclose the foe in a network of invisible adversaries, force him to stand constantly on guard, with his eyes vainly fixed on all points of the horizon, and incessantly harassed, though never really and seriously attacked by respectable forces.

Hence the Jaguar and the fifty or sixty horsemen he commanded were more feared by the Mexican government than all the other insurgents put together.

An extraordinary prestige attached to the terrible chief of these unsiegeable men; a superstitious fear preceded them, and their mere approach produced disorder among the troops sent to fight them.

The Jaguar cleverly profited by his advantages to attempt the most hazardous enterprises and the most daring strokes. The one he meditated at this moment was one of the boldest he had hitherto conceived, for it was nothing less than to carry off the *conducta de plata* and make a prisoner of Captain Melendez, an officer whom he justly considered one of his most dangerous adversaries, and with whom he, for that very reason, longed to measure himself, for he foresaw the light such a victory would shed over the insurrection, and the partizans it would immediately attract to him.

After leaving John Davis behind him, the Jaguar rapidly advanced toward a thick forest, whose dark outline stood out on the horizon, and in which he prepared to bivouac for the night. He wished to remain near the two men he had detached as scouts, in order the sooner to learn the result of their operations.

A little after sunset, the insurgents reached the forest, and instantaneously disappeared under covert.

On reaching the top of a small hill which commanded the landscape, the Jaguar halted, and ordered his men to dismount and camp.

A bivouac is soon organised in the desert. A sufficient space is cleared with axes, fires are lighted at regular distances; the horses are picketed, and sentries placed to watch over the common safety, and then everybody lies down before the fire, rolls himself in his blanket, and that is all. These rough men, accustomed to brave the fury of the seasons, sleep as profoundly under the canopy of the sky as the denizens of towns in their sumptuous mansions.

The young man, when everybody had lain down to rest, went the rounds to assure himself that all was in order, and then returned to the fire, when he fell into earnest thought.

The whole night passed and he did not make the slightest movement; but he did not sleep, his eyes were open and fixed on the slowly expiring embers. What were the thoughts that contracted his forehead and made his eyebrows meet? It would be impossible to say. Perhaps he was travelling in the country of fancy, dreaming wide awake one of those glorious dreams we have at the age of twenty, which are so intoxicating and deceitful! Suddenly he started and sprang up as if worked by a spring. At this moment the sun appeared in the horizon, and began slowly dispersing the gloom. The young man bent forward and listened.

The sharp snap of a gun being cocked was heard a short distance off, and a sentry concealed in the shrubs shouted in a harsh, sharp voice—

“Who goes there?”

“A friend,” was the reply from the bushes.

“Tranquil here!” muttered the Jaguar; “for what reason can he seek me?”

And he rushed in the direction where he expected to find the Panther-killer.

CHAPTER XXII.

BLUE-FOX.

WE will now return to Blue-fox and his two comrades, whom we left at the moment when, after hearing bullets “ping” past their ears, they instinctively intrenched themselves behind rocks and trunks of trees.

So soon as they had taken this indispensable precaution against the invisible assailants, the three men carefully inspected their weapons to be ready to reply.

They remained thus for a long period, though nothing disturbed the silence of the prairie, or the slightest sign revealed to them that the attack would be renewed.

Suffering from the deepest anxiety, not knowing to what they should attribute this attack, or what enemies they had to fear, the three men knew not what to do, or how to escape with honour from their embarrassing position. At length Blue-fox resolved to go reconnoitring.

Still, as the chief was justly afraid of falling into an ambuscade, carefully prepared to capture him and his comrades, without striking a blow, he thought it prudent, ere he started, to take the most minute precautions.

After arranging with his comrades a signal in the probable event of their help being required, he took off his buffalo-robe, whose wide folds might have impeded his movements, removed all the ornaments with which his head, neck, and chest were

loaded, and only retained his *mitasses*, a species of drawers made in two pieces, fastened from distance to distance with hair, bound round the loins with a strip of untanned deer-hide, and descending to his ankles.

Thus clothed, he rolled himself several times in the sand, for his body to assume an earthy colour. Then he passed through his belt his tomahawk and scalping-knife, weapons an Indian never lays aside, seized his rifle in his right hand, and, after giving a parting nod to his comrades, who attentively watched his different preparations, he lay down on the ground, and began crawling like a serpent through the tall grass.

Although the sun had risen for some time, and was pouring its dazzling beams over the prairie, Blue-fox's departure was managed with such circumspection that he was far out on the plain, while his comrades fancied him close to them; not a blade of grass had been agitated in his passage, or a pebble slipped under his feet.

From time to time Blue-fox stopped, took a peering glance around, and then, when he felt assured that all was quiet, and nothing had revealed his position, he began crawling again on his hands and knees in the direction of the forest.

He soon reached a spot entirely devoid of trees, where the grass, lightly trodden down at various spots, led him to suppose he was reaching the place where the men who fired must have been ambushed.

The Indian stopped, in order to investigate more closely the trail he had discovered.

It apparently belonged to one man; it was clumsy, wide, and made without caution, the footsteps of a white man ignorant of the customs of the prairie, than of a hunter or Indian.

The bushes were broken as if the person who passed through them had done so by force, running along without taking the trouble to part the brambles; while at several spots the trampled earth was soaked with blood.

Blue-fox could not at all understand this strange trail.

Was it a feint employed by his enemies to deceive him more easily by letting him see a clumsy trail intended to conceal the real one? or was it, on the other hand, the trail of a white man wandering about the desert?

The Indian knew not what opinion to adhere to, and his perplexity was great. To him it was evident that from this spot the shot was fired which saluted him at the moment when he was about to begin his speech; but for what object had the man, whoever he was, that had chosen this ambush, left such manifest traces of his passage?

At length, after trying for a long time to solve this problem, and racking his brains in vain to arrive at a probable conclusion, Blue-fox adhered to his first one, that this trail was fictitious.

The great fault of cunning persons is to suppose that all men are cunning like themselves, hence they frequently deceive themselves, and the frankness of the means employed by their opponent completely defeats them.

Blue-fox soon perceived that his supposition was false, that he had given the enemy credit for much greater skill and sagacity than he really possessed, and that what he had regarded as an extremely complicated scheme intended to deceive was, in fact, the passing of a man.

After hesitating and turning back several times, the Indian at length resolved on pushing forward, and following what he believed to be a false trail, under the conviction that he would speedily find the real one; but, as he was persuaded that he had to do with extremely crafty fellows, he redoubled his prudence and precautions, only advancing step by step, carefully exploring the bushes and the chapparal.

His manœuvres occupied a long time; he had left his comrades for more than two hours, when he found himself all at once at the entrance of a rather large clearing, from which he was only separated by a curtain of foliage.

The Indian stopped, drew himself up gently, parted the branches, and looked into the clearing.

A magnificent mahogany tree, whose luxuriant branches overshadowed the whole clearing, stood nearly in the centre. At the foot of this gigantic denizen of the forest two men were visible.

The first, dressed in a monk's gown, was lying on the ground with closed eyes; the second, kneeling by his side, seemed to be paying him anxious attention.

Owing to the position occupied by the red-skin, he was enabled to distinguish the features of this second person, whose face was turned toward him.

He was a man of lofty stature, but excessively thin; his face, owing to the changes of weather to which it must have been long exposed, was of a brick colour, and furrowed by deep wrinkles; a snow-white beard fell on his chest, mingled with the long curls of his equally white hair, which fell in disorder on his shoulders. He wore the garb of the American rangers combined with the Mexican costume; thus a vicuna-skin hat, ornamented with a gold *golilla*, covered his head; a zarapé served as his cloak, and his cotton-velvet violet trousers were thrust into long deer-skin gaiters, that came up to his knees.

It was impossible to guess this man's age; although his harsh and marked features, and his wild eyes, which burned with a concentrated fire and had a wandering expression, revealed that he had attained old age, still no trace of decrepitude was visible in any part of his person; his stature seemed not to have lost an inch of its height, so straight was he still; his knotted limbs, full of muscles hard as ropes, seemed endowed with extraordinary strength and suppleness; in a word, he had all the appearance of a dangerous wood-ranger.

In his girdle he carried a pair of long pistols, and a sword with a straight and wide blade, called a machete, passed through an iron ring instead of a sheath, hung on his left side. Two rifles, one of which doubtless belonged to him, were leant against the trunk of the tree, and a magnificent mustang, picketed a few yards off, was nibbling the young tree-shoots.

What it has taken us so long to describe, the Indian saw at a glance.

By an instinctive movement of prudence he cocked his rifle, and after he had done this he went on watching what was doing in the clearing.

At length the man dressed in the monk's gown made a slight movement as if to rise, and partly opened his eyes; but too weak yet, probably, to endure the brilliancy of the sunbeams, though they were filtered through the dense foliage, he closed them again; still, the individual who was nursing him saw that he had regained his senses.

Considering, therefore, that, for the present at least, his attentions were no longer needed by his patient, the stranger rose, took his rifle, and awaited stoically, after giving a look round the clearing, whose gloomy and hateful expression caused the Indian chief to give a start of terror in his leafy hiding-place.

Several minutes elapsed, during which no sound was audible, save the rustling of the stream over its bed.

At length the man lying on the ground made a second movement, and opened his eyes.

After looking wildly around him, his eyes were fastened with a species of strange fascination on the tall old man still standing motionless by his side.

"Thanks," he at last murmured, in a weak voice.

"Thanks for what?" the stranger asked, harshly.

"Thanks for having saved my life, brother."

"I am not your brother, monk," the stranger said, mockingly; "I am a heretic, a gringo, as you are pleased to call us; look at me, you have not examined me yet with sufficient attention."

These words were uttered with such a sarcastic accent that the monk was momentarily confounded.

"Who are you, then?" he at length asked, with secret apprehension.

"What does that concern you?" the other said, with an ill-omened laugh; "the demon, mayhap."

The monk made a sudden effort to rise.

"May Heaven save me from falling into the hands of the Evil Spirit!" he added.

"Well, you ass," the other said, "reassure yourself, I am not the demon, but a man like yourself, perhaps not quite so hypocritical, though."

"Do you speak truly? Are you really one of my fellow-men, disposed to serve me?"

"Who can answer for the future?" the stranger replied; "up to the present, at any rate, you have had no cause of complaint against me."

"No, oh no, I do not think so, although since my fainting fit my ideas have been quite confused."

"What do I care? that does not concern me, for I ask nothing of you; I have enough business of my own not to trouble myself with that of others. Come, do you feel better? have you recovered sufficiently to continue your journey?"

"What! continue my journey?" the monk asked timidly; "do you intend to abandon me then?"

"Why not? I have already wasted too much time."

"What?" the monk objected, "after the interest you have so benevolently taken in me, you would have the courage to abandon me thus when almost dead?"

"Why not? I do not know you, and have no occasion to help you. Accidentally crossing this clearing, I noticed you lying breathless and pale as a corpse. I gave you that care which is refused to no one in the desert; now that you have returned to life, I can no longer be of service to you, so I am off; what can be more simple or logical? Good-bye, and may the demon for whom you took me just now grant you his protection!"

After uttering these words in a tone of bitter irony, the stranger threw his rifle over his shoulder.

"Stay, in Heaven's name!" the monk exclaimed, as he rose with greater haste than with his weakness seemed possible, but fear produced the strength; "what will become of me alone in this desert?"

"That does not concern me," the stranger answered; "is not the maxim of the desert, Each for himself?"

"Listen," the monk said eagerly; "my name is Fray Antonio, and I am wealthy: if you protect me, I will reward you handsomely."

The stranger smiled contemptuously.

"What have you to fear? you are young and well armed; are you not capable of protecting yourself?"

"No, because I am pursued by implacable enemies. Last night they inflicted on me horrible and degrading torture, and I only managed with great difficulty to escape from their clutches. This morning accident brought me across two of these men. On seeing them a species of raging madness possessed me; the idea of avenging myself occurred to me; I aimed at them, fired, and then fled. These men are doubtless pursuing me; if they find me—and they will do so, for they are wood-rangers, perfectly acquainted with the desert—they will kill me without pity; save me! save me! and my gratitude will be unbounded."

The stranger had listened to this pathetic pleading without moving a muscle of his face. When the monk ceased, he rested the butt of his rifle on the ground.

"All that you say may be true," he answered drily, "but I care as little for it as I

do for a flash in the pan; if you knew who I am, you would very soon give up tormenting my ears with your jabbering."

The monk fixed a terrified look on the strange man, not knowing what to say to him.

"Who are you then?" he asked him.

"Who I am?" he said, with an ironical smile, "you would like to know. Very good, listen in your turn; I have only a few words to say, but they will ice the blood in your veins with terror; I am the White Scalper, the Pitiless one!"

The monk tottered back a few paces, and clasped his hands with an effort.

"Oh, my God!" he exclaimed, frenziedly; "I am lost!"

. At this moment the hoot of an owl was heard a short distance off. The hunter started.

"Some one was listening to us!" he exclaimed, and rushed rapidly to the side whence the signal came, while the monk, half dead with terror, fell on his knees and addressed a fervent prayer to heaven.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE WHITE SCALPER.

IF, instead of telling a true story, we were inventing a romance, we should certainly guard ourselves against introducing into our narrative persons like the one we have to deal with now; unhappily, we are constrained to follow the line ready traced before us, and depict our characters as they exist.

A few years before the period at which the first part of our story begins, a rumour, at first dull, but which soon attained a certain degree of consistency and a great notoriety in the vast deserts of Texas, arose: almost suddenly, icing with fear the Indios bravos, and the adventurers of every description who continually wander about these vast solitudes.

It was stated that a man, apparently white, had been for some time on the desert, pursuing the red-skins, against whom he seemed to have declared an obstinate war. Acts of horrible cruelty and extraordinary boldness were narrated about this man, who was said to be always alone; whenever he met Indians, no matter their number, he attacked them; those who fell into his power were scalped, and their hearts torn out, and in order that it might be known that they had fallen under his blows, he made on their stomach a wide incision, in the shape of a cross. At times this implacable enemy of the red race glided into their villages, fired them during the night, when all were asleep, and then he made a frightful butchery, killing all who came in his way; women, children, and old men, he made no exception.

This gloomy redresser of wrongs, however, did not merely pursue Indians with his implacable hatred—half-breeds, smugglers, pirates, in a word, all the bold border-ruffians accustomed to live at the expense of society had a rude account to settle with him; but the latter he did not scalp, but merely contented himself with fastening them securely to trees, where he condemned them to die of hunger, and become the prey of wild beasts.

During the first years, the adventurers and red-skins, drawn together by the feeling of a common danger, had several times banded to put an end to this ferocious enemy, bind him and inflict the law of retaliation on him; but this man seemed to be protected by a charm, which enabled him to escape all the snares laid for him,

and circumvent all the ambuscades formed on his road. It was impossible to catch him; the strangest legends were current about him; every one feared him as a maleficent spirit; the Indians named him *Klein-Stomann*, or the White Scalper, and the adventurers designated him among themselves by the epithet of Pitiless.

These two names were justly given to this man, with whom murder and carnage seemed the supreme enjoyment, such pleasure did he find in feeling his victims quivering beneath his blood-red hand, and tearing the heart out of their bosom; hence his mere name, uttered in a whisper, filled the bravest with horror.

But who was this man? whence did he come?

No one could answer these questions. This individual was a horrifying enigma, which no person could solve.

Was he one of those monstrous organisations, which, beneath the envelope of man, contain a tiger's heart?

Or, else, a soul ulcerated by a frightful misfortune, all whose faculties are directed to one object—vengeance?

Both these hypotheses were equally possible; perhaps both were true.

As we have said, the Scalper rushed into the chapparal to discover who had given the signal that startled him; his researches were minute, but they produced no other result than that of enabling him to discover that he was not mistaken, and that a spy hidden in the bushes had really seen all that took place in the clearing, and heard all that was said.

Blue-fox, after summoning his comrades, cautiously retired, convinced that if he fell into the hands of the Scalper, he would be lost, in spite of all his courage.

The latter returned thoughtfully to the side of the monk, whose praying still went on.

The Scalper looked for a moment at the Fray, an ironical smile playing round his pale lips, and then gave him a hearty blow with the butt of his rifle.

"Get up," he said, roughly.

The monk fell on his hands, and remained motionless. Believing that the other intended to kill him, he resigned himself to his fate.

"Come, get up, you devil of a monk!" the Scalper went on; "have you not mumbled paternosters enough?"

Fray Ambrosio gently raised his head.

"Forgive me, Excellency," he replied; "I have finished; I am now at your orders."

And he quickly sprang up, for there was something in the other's eye which told him that disobedience would lead to unpleasant results.

"That is well, scoundrel! You seem to me as fit to pull a trigger as to say a prayer. Load your rifle, for the moment has arrived for you to fight like a man, unless you wish to be killed like a dog."

The monk took a frightened glance around.

"Excellency," he stammered, with great hesitation, "is it necessary that I should fight?"

"Yes, if you wish to keep a whole skin; if you do not, why, remain quiet."

"But perhaps there is another mode?"

"What is it?"

"Flight, for instance," he said, insinuatingly.

"Try it," the other replied, with a grin.

The monk, encouraged by this semi-concession, continued, with slightly increased boldness—

"You have a very fine horse."

"Is it not?"

"Magnificent," Fray Antonio went on.

"Yes, and you would not be vexed if I let you mount it, to fly more rapidly, eh?"

"Oh! do not think that," he said, with a gesture of denial.

"Enough!" the Scalper roughly interrupted; "think of yourself, for your enemies are coming."

With one bound he was in the saddle, made his horse curvet, and hid himself behind the enormous stem of the mahogany tree.

Fray Antonio, aroused by the approach of danger, quickly seized his rifle, and also got behind the tree.

At the same moment a rather loud rustling was heard in the bushes, which then parted, and several men appeared; they were fifteen in number, and Apache warriors. In the midst of them were Blue-fox, John Davis, and his companions.

Blue-fox, though he had never found himself face to face with the White Scalper, had often heard him spoken of, both by Indians and hunters; hence, when he heard him pronounce his name, an indescribable agony contracted his heart, as he thought of all the cruelty to which his brothers had been victims from this man; and the thought of seizing him occurred to him. He hastened to give the signal agreed on with the hunters, and rushing through the chapparal with the velocity characteristic of Indians, went to the spot where his warriors were waiting, and bade them follow him. On his return he met the two hunters, who had heard the signal, and were hurrying to his help.

In a few words Blue-fox explained to them what was occurring. To tell the truth, we must confess that this confidence, far from exciting the warriors and hunters, singularly lowered their ardour, by revealing to them that they were about to expose themselves to a terrible danger, by contending with a man who was the more dangerous, because no weapon could strike him.

Still, it was too late to recoil, and flight was impossible; the warriors, therefore, determined to push on.

As for the hunters, if they did not completely share in the blind credulity of their comrades, and their superstitious fears, this fight was far from pleasing them.

"Excellency!" the monk exclaimed, in a lamentable voice, "do not abandon me!"

"No, if you do not abandon yourself, scoundrel!"

On reaching the skirt of the clearing, the Apaches, following their usual tactics, sheltered themselves behind trees, so that this confined clearing, in which so many men were on the point of beginning an obstinate struggle, seemed absolutely deserted.

There was a moment of silence and hesitation. The Scalper at length decided on being the first to speak.

"Halloh!" he cried, "what do you want here?"

Blue-fox was going to answer, but John Davis prevented him.

"Leave him to me," he said.

Quitting the trunk of the tree behind which he was sheltered, he then boldly walked a few paces forward, and stopped almost in the centre of the clearing.

"Where are you, you who are speaking?" he asked, in a loud and firm voice; "are you afraid of letting yourself be seen?"

"I fear nothing," the squatter replied.

"Show yourself, then, that I may know you again."

Thus challenged, the Scalper came up within two paces of the hunter.

"Here I am," he said; "what do you want with me?"

Davis let the horse come up without making any movement to avoid it.

"Ah," he said, "I am not sorry to have had a look at you."

"Is that all you have to say to me?" the other asked.

"Hang it! you are in a tremendous hurry. Give me time to breathe, at *any* rate."

"A truce to jests, which may cost you dearly; tell me at once what your proposals are—I have no time to lose in idle talk."

"Will you surrender?"

"I prefer attacking you."

"Oh, oh, you have a tough job before you; there are eighteen of us, do you know that?"

"I do not care for your numbers. If there were a hundred of you, I would attack you all the same."

"By Heaven! for the rarity of the fact, I should be curious to see the combat of one man against twenty."

"You will do so ere long."

While saying this, the Scalper pulled his horse back.

"One moment, hang it!" the hunter exclaimed, sharply; "let me say a word to you."

"Say it."

"Will you surrender?"

"What?"

"I ask you if you will surrender."

"Nonsense," the Scalper exclaimed; "you are mad. I surrender! it is you who will have to ask mercy."

"I would not believe it, even if you killed me."

"Come, return to your shelter," the Scalper said, with a shrug of his shoulders; "I do not wish to kill you defencelessly."

"All the worse for you," the hunter said; "I have warned you honourably, now I wash my hands of it."

"Thanks," the Scalper answered, energetically; "but I am not yet in so bad a state as you fancy."

John Davis contented himself with shrugging his shoulders, and returned slowly to his shelter in the forest, whistling Yankee Doodle.

The Scalper had not imitated him; although he was perfectly well aware that a great number of enemies surrounded him and watched over his movements, he remained firm and motionless in the centre of the clearing.

"Hola!" he shouted, in a mocking voice, "you valiant Apaches, who hide yourselves like rabbits; must I come and smoke you out of your holes in order to make you show yourselves? Come on, if you do not wish me to believe you old cowardly and frightened squaws."

These insulting words raised to the highest pitch the exasperation of the Apache warriors.

"Will my brothers allow themselves any longer to be mocked by a single man?" Blue-fox exclaimed; "our cowardice causes his strength. Let us rush with the speed of the hurricane on this genius of evil: he cannot resist the shock of so many renowned warriors. Forward, brothers, forward!"

And uttering his war-cry, which his comrades repeated, the valiant chief rushed upon the Scalper, resolutely brandishing his rifle over his head; all the warriors followed him.

The Scalper awaited them without stirring; but so soon as he saw them within reach, drawing in the reins, and pressing his knees, he made his noble steed leap into the thick of the Indians. Seizing his rifle by the barrel, and employing it like a club, he began smiting to the right and left with a vigour and rapidity that had something supernatural about them.

Then a frightful medley commenced; the Indians rushed on this man, who,

being a skilful horseman, made his steed go through the most unexpected curves, and by the rapidity of his movements prevented the enemy leaping on his bridle and stopping him.

The two hunters at first remained quiet, convinced that it was impossible for a single man even to resist for a few moments such numerous and brave foes; but they soon perceived, to their great amazement, that they were mistaken.

The hunters then began changing their opinion as to the result of the fight, and wished to help their comrades, but their rifles were useless to them in the continued changes of the scene of action, and their bullets might as easily have struck friend as foe; hence they threw away their rifles, drew their knives, and hurried to the assistance of the Apaches.

Blue-fox, dangerously wounded, was lying in a state of insensibility. The warriors, still on their legs, were beginning to think of a retreat, and casting anxious glances behind them.

The Scalper still fought with the same fury, mocking and insulting his enemies.

"Ah! ah!" he exclaimed, on noticing the hunters; "so you want your share. Come on, come on?"

The latter did not allow it to be repeated, but rushed wildly upon him.

But they fared badly; John Davis, struck by the horse's chest, was hurled twenty feet, and fell to the ground; at the same instant his comrade's skull was broken, and he expired without a groan.

This last instance gave the finishing stroke to the Indians, who, unable to overcome the terror with which this extraordinary man inspired them, began flying in all directions with yells of terror.

The Scalper gave a glance of triumph and satisfied hatred at the sanguinary arena, where a dozen bodies lay stretched out, and urging his horse on, he caught up a fugitive, lifted him by the hair, and threw him over his saddle-bow, and disappeared in the forest with a horrible grin.

Once again the Scalper had opened a bloody passage for himself.

As for Fray Antonio, so soon as he saw that the fight had begun, he thought it needless to await its issue; he therefore took advantage of the opportunity, and gliding gently from tree to tree, effected a skilful retreat.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AFTER THE FIGHT.

FOR more than half an hour the silence of death hovered over the clearing, which offered a most sad and lugubrious aspect through the fight we described in the preceding chapter.

At length John Davis, who in reality had received no serious wound, for his fall was merely occasioned by the shock of the Scalper's powerful horse, opened his eyes and looked around him in amazement; the fall had been sufficiently violent to cause him serious bruises, and throw him into a deep fainting fit; hence, on regaining consciousness, the American, still stunned, did not remember a single thing that had happened.

Still, his ideas grew gradually clearer, his memory returned, and he remembered the strange and disproportioned fight of one man against twenty, in which the former remained the victor, after killing and dispersing his assailants.

"Hum!" he muttered to himself, "whether he be man or demon, that individual is a sturdy fellow."

He got up with some difficulty, carefully feeling his paining limbs; and when he was quite assured he had nothing broken, he continued with evident satisfaction—

"Thank Heaven! I got off more cheaply than I had a right to suppose, after the way in which I was upset." Then he added, as he gave a glance of pity to his comrade, who lay dead near him: "That poor Jim was not so lucky as I, and his fun is over. What a tremendous machete-stroke he received! Well, we are all mortal, each has his turn; to-day it's he, to-morrow I; so goes the world."

Leaning on his rifle, for he still experienced some difficulty in walking, he took a few steps on the clearing in order to convince himself by a conclusive experiment that his limbs were in a sound state.

After a few moments of an exercise that restored circulation to his blood and elasticity to his joints, the thought occurred to him of trying whether among the bodies lying around him any still breathed.

"They are only Indians," he muttered, "but, after all, they are men; and if I succeed in saving any, their knowledge of the desert will be of great service to me."

This last consideration determined him on helping men whom probably without it he would have abandoned to their fate, that is to say, to the teeth of the wild beasts which, attracted by the scent of blood, would have certainly made them their prey after dark.

Still it is our duty to render the egotistic citizen of the United States the justice of saying that, so soon as he had formed this determination, he acquitted himself conscientiously and sagaciously of his self-imposed task.

Unfortunately, most of the persons he inspected had received such serious wounds that life had long fled.

"Hang it, hang it!" the American muttered at every corpse he turned over, "these poor savages were killed by a master-hand. At any rate, they did not suffer long."

He thus reached the spot where lay the body of Blue-fox, with a wide gaping wound in his chest.

"Ah, ah! here is the worthy chief," he went on. "What a gash! let us see if he is dead too."

He bent over the motionless body, and put the blade of his knife to the Indian's lips.

"He does not stir," he continued; "I am afraid I shall have some difficulty in bringing him round."

In a few minutes, however, he looked at the blade of his knife and saw it was slightly tarnished.

"He is not dead yet; while there is life there is hope."

After this aside, John Davis fetched some water in his hat, mixed a small quantity of spirits with it, and began carefully bathing the wound; this duty performed, he sounded it and found it of no great depth, and the abundant loss of blood had in all probability brought on the state of unconsciousness. Reassured by this reflection, he pounded some *oregano* leaves between two stones, made a species of cataplasm of them, laid it on the wound, and secured it with a strip of bark; then unclenching the wounded man's teeth with the blade of his knife, he thrust in the mouth of his flask, and made him drink a quantity of spirits.

Success almost immediately crowned the American's tentatives, for the chief gave vent to a deep sigh.

"Bravo!" John exclaimed. "Courage, chief, you are saved. By Jove! you may boast of having come back a precious long distance."

For some minutes the Indian remained stunned, looking around him absently, without any consciousness of the situation in which he was.

John attentively watched him. By degrees the red-skin appeared to grow livelier; his eyes lost their vacant expression, he sat up and passed his hand over his dank brow.

"Is the fight ended?" he asked.

"Yes," John answered, "in our complete defeat; that was an idea we had of capturing such a demon."

"Has he escaped, then?"

"Certainly, and without a single wound, after killing at least a dozen of your warriors, and cleaving my poor Jim's skull down to the shoulders."

"Oh!" the Indian muttered hoarsely, "he is not a man, but the spirit of evil."

"Let him be what he likes," John exclaimed, "I intend to fight it out with him some day."

"May the Wacondah preserve my brother from such a meeting, for this demon would kill him."

"Perhaps so; as it is, if he did not do so to-day, it was no fault of his; but let him take care; we may some day stand face to face with equal weapons."

"What does he care for weapons? did you not see that they have no power over him?"

"Hum! that is possible; but for the present let us leave the subject. How do you find yourself?"

"Better, much better; the remedy you have applied to my wound does me great good; I am beginning to feel quite comfortable."

"All the better; now try to rest while I watch; then we can consult."

The red-skin smiled on hearing this remark.

"Blue-fox is no cowardly old woman whom a tooth-ache or ear-ache renders incapable of moving."

"I know you are a brave warrior, chief; but nature has limits, and your wound must have reduced you to a state of extreme weakness."

"I thank you, my brother; those words come from a friend; but Blue-fox is a sachem in his nation, death alone can render him unable to move."

While uttering these words, the Indian made a supreme effort; fighting against pain, with the energy and contempt of suffering that characterise the red race, he succeeded in rising, and not only stood firmly on his feet, but even walked several yards without assistance, or the slightest trace of emotion appearing on his face.

The American regarded him with profound admiration; he could not imagine, though he himself justly enjoyed a reputation for bravery, that it was possible to carry so far the triumph of moral over physical force.

The Indian smiled proudly.

"Does my brother still believe that Blue-fox is so weak?" he asked him.

"On my word, chief, I know not what to think; what you have just done confounds me; I am prepared to suppose you capable of accomplishing impossibilities."

"The chiefs of my nation are renowned warriors, who laugh at pain," the red-skin said, proudly.

"I should be inclined to believe it after your way of acting."

"My brother is a man; he has understood me. We will inspect together the warriors lying on the ground."

"As for your poor comrades, chief, I am compelled to tell you that we have no occasion to trouble ourselves about them, for they are all dead."

"Good! they fell nobly while fighting; the Wacondah will receive them into his bosom."

"So be it!"

"Now, before all else, let us settle the affair we began this morning."

John Davis, in spite of his acquaintance with desert life, was confounded by the coolness of this man, who, having escaped death by a miracle, still suffering from a terrible wound, and who had regained possession of his intellectual faculties only a few moments before, seemed no longer to think of what had occurred, considered the events to which he had all but fallen a victim as the very natural accidents of the life he led, and began again, with the greatest freedom of mind, a conversation interrupted by a terrible fight, at the very point where he left it.

"Be it so," he said; "since you wish it, chief, I will deliver the message intrusted to me for you."

"My brother will take a place by my side."

The American sat down on the ground by the chief, not without a certain feeling of apprehension through his isolation on this battle-field strewn with corpses; but the Indian appeared so calm and tranquil that John Davis felt ashamed to let his anxiety be seen, and affecting carelessness, began to speak.

"I am sent to my brother by a great warrior of the pale-faces."

"I know him; he is called the Jaguar, whose eye flashes like that of the animal whose name he bears."

"Good! The Jaguar wishes to bury the hatchet between his warriors and those of my brother, in order that peace may unite them, and that, instead of fighting with each other, they may pursue the buffalo on the same hunting-grounds, and avenge themselves on their common enemies."

The Indian remained silent for a long time; at length he raised his head.

"My brother will open his ears," he said, "a sachem is about to speak."

"I am listening," the American answered.

The chief went on—

"The words my bosom breathes are sincere—the Wacondah inspires me with them; the pale-faces, since they were brought by the genius of evil in their large medicine-canoes to the territories of my fathers, have ever been the virulent enemies of the red man; invading their richest and most fertile hunting-grounds, pursuing them like wild beasts whenever they met with them, burning their callis, and dispersing the bones of their ancestors to the four winds of Heaven. Has not such constantly been the conduct of the pale-faces? I await my brother's answer."

"Well," the American said, "I cannot deny, chief, that there is some truth in what you say; but still, all the men of my colour have not been unkind to the red-skins."

"Wah! two or three have not been so, but that only goes to prove what I assert. Let us come to the question we wish to discuss at present."

"Yes, that will be the best," the American replied.

"My nation hates the pale-faces," the chief continued; "the condor does not make its nest with the maukawis, or the grizzly bear pair with the antelope. I, myself, have an instinctive hatred for the pale-faces. This morning, then, I should have peremptorily declined the Jaguar's proposals, for how do the wars the pale-faces wage together concern us? But now my brother has saved my life; he helped when I was stretched out on the ground, and the genius of death was hovering over my head; ingratitude is a white vice, gratitude a red virtue. From this day the hatchet is buried between the Jaguar and Blue-fox for five succeeding moons; for five moons the enemies of the Jaguar will be those of Blue-fox; the two chiefs will fight side by side, like loving brothers: in three suns from this one, the sachem will join the pale-face chief at the head of five hundred renowned warriors, whose heels are adorned with numerous coyote tails, and who form the pick of the nation. What will the Jaguar do for Blue-fox and his warriors?"

"The Jaguar is a generous chief; if he is terrible for his enemies, his hand is always open for his friends; each Apache warrior will receive a rifle, one hundred

charges of powder, and a scalping-knife. The sachem will also receive in addition to these presents two vicuna-skins filled with fire-water."

"Wah!" the chief exclaimed, "my brother has said truly that the Jaguar is a generous chief. Here is my totem as signal of alliance."

While thus speaking the chief drew from his game-bag or medicine-bag, which he wore slung, a square piece of parchment, on which was clumsily drawn the totem or animal emblematic of the tribe, handed it to the American, who placed it in his bosom.

"I thank my brother the sachem," John Davis then said, "for having acceded to my proposal; he will have no cause to repent it."

"A chief has given his word; but see, the sun is lengthening the shadows of the trees; the hour has come to pay the last duties to the chiefs who are dead, and then separate to rejoin our friends."

"On foot as we are? that appears to me rather difficult," John remarked.

"The warriors of Blue-fox are watching over him," said the Indian.

In fact, the chief had hardly twice given a private signal, ere fifty Apache warriors burst into the clearing, and assembled silently around him.

The fugitives who escaped from the Scalper's terrible arm returned to their camp and announced the news of their defeat to their comrades, and a detachment was sent off under the orders of a subaltern chief to look for the sachem. But, seeing Blue-fox in conference with a pale-face, remained under covert, patiently waiting till it pleased him to summon them.

The sachem gave orders to bury the dead.

The bodies were carefully washed, wrapped in new buffalo-robcs, and then placed in a sitting posture in trenches dug for each of them, with their weapons, bit, and provisions by their side, in order that they might want for nothing on their journey to the happy hunting-grounds.

When these rites had been performed, the trenches were filled up, and covered with heavy stones, lest the wild beasts should grub up and devour the bodies.

The sun was just disappearing on the horizon, when the Apaches finished these last duties. Blue-fox then walked up to the hunter.

"My brother wishes to return to the warriors of his nation?" he said to him.

"Yes," the American laconically answered.

"The pale-face has lost his horse, so he will mount the mustang Blue-fox offers him; within two hours he can have returned to his friends."

John Davis gratefully accepted the present made him, mounted at once, and set off at full speed.

On their side, the Indians, at a signal from their chief, buried themselves in the forest, and the clearing where such terrible events had occurred returned to its pristine silence and solitude.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN EXPLANATION.

LIKE all men the greater portion of whose life is spent in the desert, the Jaguar was gifted with excessive prudence joined to extreme circumspection.

Though still young, his life had been composed of such strange incidents, he had been an actor in such extraordinary scenes, that from an early age he had grown

accustomed to conceal the emotions of his heart, and preserve on his countenance, whatever he might see, that marble-like stoicism which characterises the Indians, and which the latter have converted into such a tremendous weapon against their enemies.

On hearing Tranquil's voice all at once so close to him, the young man gave a start, frowned, and asked himself mentally how it was that the hunter came to find him thus in his camp, and what reason was powerful enough to impel him to do so.

Still the young man, whom the steps taken by Tranquil flattered more than he cared to let any one see, concealed his apprehensions, and walked quickly, and with a smile on his lips, to meet the hunter.

The latter was not alone; Loyal Heart accompanied him.

The Canadian's manner was coldly reserved.

"You are welcome to my camp," the Jaguar said kindly, as he offered his hand.

"Thank you," the Canadian answered laconically, not touching the proffered hand.

"I am glad to see you," the young man went on; "what accident has brought you in this direction?"

"My comrade and I have been hunting until fatigued, and the smoke of your camp attracted us."

The Jaguar pretended to accept as gospel this clumsy evasion of a man who justly prided himself as being the healthiest and strongest wood-ranger of the desert.

"Come, then, and take a seat at my camp-fire, and be good enough to regard everything here as belonging to you, and act in accordance with it."

The Canadian bowed, but made no answer, and with Loyal Heart followed the hunter who preceded them.

On reaching the fire, upon which the young man threw a few handfuls of dry wood, the hunters sat down on buffalo-skulls placed there as seats, and then, without breaking the silence, filled their pipes and began smoking.

The Jaguar imitated them.

Those white men who traverse the prairie, and whose life is spent in hunting or trapping on these vast solitudes, have unconsciously assumed most of the habits and customs of the red-skins.

The tendency of civilised men to return to savage life, and the facility with which hunters, born for the most part in the centres of population, forget their habits of comfort, surrender the customs of towns, and renounce the usages by which they were governed during the earlier part of their life, in order to adopt the manners, and even the habits, of the red-skins, is worthy of note.

The Jaguar, thoroughly conversant with red-skin customs, remained silently by the side of his guests, smoking and thinking, and waiting patiently till they decided on speaking.

At length, after some time, Tranquil shook the ashes from his pipe, and turned to the young man.

"You did not expect me, I fancy?" he said.

"I did not," the other answered; "still, be assured that the visit, though unexpected, is not less agreeable."

The hunter curled his lip in a singular fashion.

"Who knows?" he muttered; "perhaps yes, perhaps no; man's heart is a mysterious and undecipherable book, in which only madmen fancy they can read."

"It is not so with me, hunter, as you know."

The Canadian shook his head.

"You are still young; the heart to which you refer is still unknown to yourself;

in the short period your existence has passed through, the wind of passion has not yet blown over you and bowed you down before its powerful impetus: wait, in order to reely with certainty, until you have loved and suffered; when you have bravely sustained the shock, and resisted the hurricane of youth, it will be time for you to speak."

These words were uttered with a stern accent.

"You are harsh to me, to-day, Tranquil," the young man answered sorrowfully; "how have I sunk in your esteem? what reprehensible act have I done?"

"None—at any rate, it pleases me to believe so; but I fear that soon——"

He stopped and shook his head mournfully.

"Finish the sentence," said the young man.

"For what end?" he answered; "who am I that I should impose on you a line of conduct which you would probably despise, and advice which would prove unwelcome? It is better to be silent."

"Tranquil," the young man said, with an emotion he could not master, "for a long time we have known each other, you are aware of the esteem and respect I hold you in, so speak."

"Nonsense; forget what I said to you; I was wrong to think of meddling in your affairs; on the prairie, a man should only think about himself; so let us say no more."

The Jaguar rose and walked a few yards in agitation, then he brusquely returned to the hunter.

"Pardon me," he said, "for not having thought of offering you refreshment, but breakfast-time has now arrived. I trust that your comrade and yourself will do me the honour of sharing my frugal meal."

Tranquil hesitated for a second.

"This morning at sunrise," he then said, "my friend and myself ate, just before entering your camp."

"I was sure of it," the young man burst out. "Oh, oh! now my doubts are cleared up; you refuse water and salt at my fire, hunter."

"I? but you forget that——"

"Oh!" he interrupted, passionately, "no denial, Tranquil; do not seek for pretexts unworthy of yourself and me; you are too honest and sincere a man not to be frank; besides, you know the law of the prairies; a man will not break his fast with an enemy. Now, if you still have in your heart a single spark of that kindly feeling you entertained toward me at another period, explain yourself clearly; I insist on it."

"Indeed, you are right, Jaguar," the Canadian exclaimed; "it is better to have an explanation like honest hunters, than try to deceive each other like red-skins; and besides, no man is infallible. I may be mistaken as well as another."

"I am listening to you, and, if the reproaches you make are well founded, I will own it."

"Good!" the hunter said, in a more friendly tone; "you speak like a man; but, perhaps," he added, pointing to Loyal Heart, who discreetly made a move to withdraw, "you would prefer our interview being private?"

"On the contrary," the Jaguar answered, "this hunter is your friend; I hope he will soon be mine."

"I desire ardently for my part," Loyal Heart said, with a bow, "that the slight cloud which has arisen between you and Tranquil may be dispersed like the vapour driven away by the morning breeze, in order that I may become better acquainted with you."

"Thanks. Now speak, Tranquil; I am ready to listen to the charges you have against me."

"Unluckily," said Tranquil, "the strange life you have led since your arrival in

these parts gives occasion for the most unfavourable surmises; you have formed a band of adventurers and border-ruffians, outlawed by society, and living completely beyond the ordinary pale."

"Are we prairie-hunters and wood-rangers obliged to obey all the paltry exigencies of cities?"

"Yes, up to a certain point; that is to say, we are not allowed to place ourselves in open revolt against the institutions of men, to whom we continue to belong by our colour, religion, origin, and the family ties which attach us to them."

"Be it so; I admit to a certain extent the justice of your reasoning; but even supposing that the men I command are really bandits, border-ruffians as you call them, do you know from what motives they act?"

"Patience, I have not finished yet."

"Go on, then."

"Next, in addition to this band of which you are the ostensible chief, you have contracted alliances with the red-skins, the Apaches among others?"

"Yes, and no, my friend; in the sense that the alliance which you charge me with never existed until the present hour; but this morning it was probably concluded by two of my friends with Blue-fox, one of the most renowned Apache chiefs."

"Hum! that is an unlucky coincidence."

"Why so?"

"Are you aware what they did last night?"

"How should I? since I do not know where they are, and have not even received a report of the treaty."

"Well, I will tell you; they attacked the Venta del Potrero, and burned it to the ground."

The Jaguar's savage eye emitted a flash of fury; he bounded to his feet, and convulsively seized his rifle.

"By Heaven!" he shouted, "have they done that?"

"They did; and it is supposed at your instigation."

The Jaguar shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"For what object?" he said. "But Dona Carmela, what has become of her?"

"She is saved, thank Heaven!"

The young man heaved a sigh of relief.

"And you believed in such infamy on my part?"

"I do not believe it now," the hunter replied.

"Thanks, thanks! but by Heaven! the demons shall pay dearly, I swear, for the crime they have committed."

"Unluckily, if you have exculpated yourself from my first accusation, I doubt whether you will be able to do so with the second."

"You can tell me it, at any rate."

"A *conducta de plata*, commanded by Captain Melendez, is on the road for Mex co."

The young man gave a slight start.

"I know it," he said, shortly.

The hunter gave him an inquiring glance.

"They say——" he went on—

"They say," the Jaguar interrupted him, "that I am following the *conducta*, and when the propitious moment arrives, I mean to attack it at the head of my bandits, and carry off the money; that is the story?"

"Yes."

"They are right," the young man answered, coldly; "that is really my intention; what next?"

Tranquil started in surprise and indignation.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, in great grief, "what is said of you is true, then? You are really a bandit? I had hoped that the rumours in circulation in respect to your movements were but malicious and calumnious reports, spread by your enemies from sinister motives."

"And now——"

"Now, since I have heard from your own lips the verification of this accusation, I can come to but one conclusion."

"And that is——" asked the Jaguar.

"That you are a bandit," replied Tranquil, in a tone of mingled sorrow and indignation.

"Perhaps I am," said the young man; "Tranquil, your age is double mine; your experience is great; why do you judge rashly on appearances?"

"What! appearances! have you not confessed it yourself?"

"Yes, I have."

"Then you meditate a robbery?"

"A robbery!" he exclaimed, blushing with indignation; "it is true, you are bound to suppose that."

"What other name can be given to so infamous a deed?" the hunter exclaimed, violently.

The Jaguar raised his head quickly, as if he intended to answer, but his lips remained dumb.

Tranquil looked at him for a moment with mingled pity and tenderness, and then turned to Loyal Heart.

"Come, my friend," he said.

"Stay!" the young man exclaimed; "do not condemn me thus; I repeat to you that you are ignorant of the motives through which I act."

"Whatever these motives may be, they cannot be honourable; I see no other than pillage and murder."

"Oh!" the young man exclaimed.

"Let us go," Tranquil repeated.

"Stay," said the Jaguar.

"It is useless," replied the hunter.

Loyal Heart had watched this strange scene attentively and coldly.

Then speaking for the first time——

"A moment," he said; then, stepping forward, he laid his hand on the Jaguar's shoulder.

The latter raised his head.

"What do you want of me?" he asked.

"I will not detain you long."

"Proceed then."

"Listen to me," Loyal Heart answered in a deep voice; "I know not why, but a secret foreboding tells me that your conduct is not so infamous as everything leads me to suppose, and that some day you will be permitted to explain it."

"Oh! were it but possible for me to speak!"

"How long do you believe that you will be compelled to remain silent?"

"How do I know? that depends on circumstances independent of my will."

"Then you cannot fix a period?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"It is impossible; I have taken an oath, and am bound to keep it."

"Good: then promise me only one thing."

"What is it?"

"To make no attempt on the life of Captain Melendez."

The Jaguar hesitated.

"Well?" Loyal Heart went on.

"I will do everything to save it."

"Thanks!" then, turning to Tranquil, who stood motionless by his side, he said—

"Take your place again, brother, and breakfast with this caballero, I answer for him body for body; if in two months from this day he does not give you a satisfactory explanation of his conduct, I, who am bound by oath, will reveal to you this mystery, which appears, and really is, inexplicable for you."

The Jaguar started, and gave Loyal Heart a searching glance, which produced no effect, however, on the hunter's indifferently placid face.

The Canadian hesitated for a few moments, but at length took his place again by the fire, muttering—

"In two months; be it so;" and, he added, in an aside, "but till then I will watch him."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE EXPRESS.

CAPTAIN MELENDEZ was extremely anxious to pass through the dangerous defile near which the conducta had bivouacked; he knew how great was the responsibility he had taken on himself in accepting the command of the escort, and did not wish, in the event of any misfortune happening, that a charge of carelessness or negligence could be brought against him.

The sum convoyed was important. The Mexican government, ever forced to expedients to procure money, was impatiently expecting it; the captain did not conceal from himself that the whole responsibility of an attack would be mercilessly thrown on him, and that he would have to endure all the consequences, whatever might be the results of an encounter with the Border Rifles.

Hence his anxiety and alarm increased with every moment; the evident treachery of Fray Antonio only heightened his apprehensions, by making him suspect a probable trap. Though it was impossible for him to guess from what quarter the danger would come, he felt it, as it were, approaching him inch by inch, and besetting him on all sides.

This secret intuition, which told him to be on his guard, placed him in a state of continued excitement, from which he resolved to escape at all hazards, preferring to run the danger and confront it, to remaining longer with bayonets pointed at unseen foes.

Hence he doubled his vigilance, himself inspecting the vicinity of the camp, and watching the loading of the mules, which, fastened to each other, would, in the event of an attack, be placed in the centre.

Long before sunrise the captain quitted the hard bed of skins and horse-cloths on which he had vainly sought a few hours of rest, which his nervous condition rendered impossible, and began walking sharply up and down the narrow space that composed the interior of the camp, involuntarily enjoying the careless and calm slumber of the troopers, who were lying here and there on the ground, wrapped up in their *zarepés*.

In the meanwhile day gradually broke. The owl, whose matin hoot announces

the appearance of the sun, had already given its melancholy note. The captain aroused the arriero chief.

"Carai, captain," sighed the worthy man, "what fly has stung you that you awake me at so early an hour? why, the sky has scarce turned white yet; let me sleep an hour longer. I was enjoying a most delicious dream, and will try to catch it up again, for sleep is a glorious thing."

"The captain could not refrain from smiling at this singular outburst; still, he did not consider himself justified in listening to the arriero's complaints, for circumstances were too serious to lose time in futile promises.

"Up, up! Cuerpo de Cristo?" shouted the captain; "remember that we have not yet reached the Rio Seco, and that we must cross this dangerous passage before sunset."

"That is true," the arriero said, as fresh and lively as if he had been awake for an hour; "forgive me, captain, for, according to the law, my fortune answers for the load I am conveying, and if an accident happened, I and my family would be reduced to beggary."

"That is true; I did not think of that clause in your contract."

"That does not surprise me, for it cannot at all interest you; but I cannot get it out of my head, and I declare to you, captain, that since I undertook this unlucky journey, I have very often repented having accepted the conditions imposed on me; something tells me that we shall not arrive safe and sound on the other side."

"Nonsense, that is folly, Nô Bautista. You are well escorted; what cause can you have for fear?"

"None, I know, and yet I am convinced that I am not mistaken, and this journey will be fatal to me."

The same presentiments agitated the officer; still, he must not allow the arriero to perceive any of his internal disquietude.

"You are mad, on my soul," he exclaimed; "to the deuce with the absurd notions you have got into your wool-gathering noddle."

"You are at liberty, Don Juan Melendez," the arriero answered, "to laugh at these ideas; you are an educated man, and naturally believe in nothing. But I, caballero, am a poor ignorant Indian, and set faith in what my fathers believed before me."

"Come, explain yourself," the captain continued, desirous to break off the conversation without thwarting the arriero's prejudices; "what reason leads you to suppose that your journey will be unlucky? you are not the man to be frightened at your own shadow; I know that you possess incontestable bravery."

"I thank you, captain, for the good opinion you are pleased to have of me; yes, I am courageous, and believe I have several times proved it, but it was when facing dangers which my intellect understood, and not before perils contrary to natural laws."

The captain twisted his moustache impatiently at the arriero's prolixity; but, he knew the worthy man, and was aware by experience that attempting to cut short what he had to say was a loss of time.

There are certain men with whom, like the spur with restive horses, any attempt to urge them on is a sure means of making them go back.

"I presume," the young man said, "you saw some evil omen at the moment of your departure?"

"Indeed I did, captain; and certainly, after what I saw, I would not have started, had I been a man easily frightened."

"What was the omen, then?"

"Do not laugh at me, captain," the arriero continued; "my mules were saddled, the recua was waiting for me in the corral, guarded by the peons, and I was on the point of starting. Still, as I did not like separating from my wife, for a long time probably, without saying a last good-bye, I proceeded toward the house to give her a

parting kiss, when, on reaching the threshold, I raised my eyes, and saw two owls sitting on the azotea, who fixed their eyes on me with infernal steadiness. At this unexpected apparition, I shuddered involuntarily and turned my eyes away. At this very moment a dying man, carried by two soldiers on a litter, came down the street, escorted by a monk who was reciting the Penitential Psalms, and preparing him to die like an honest Christian; but the wounded man made no other answer than laughing ironically at the monk. All at once this man half rose on the litter, his eyes grew brilliant, he turned to me, gave me a glance full of sarcasm, and fell back, muttering these two words—*‘Hasta luego (we shall meet soon).’* The species of rendezvous this individual gave me had nothing very flattering about it, I fancy!” the arriero continued. “I was deeply affected by the words, and I rushed toward him with the intention of reproaching him, as I thought was proper—but he was dead.”

“Who was the man—did you learn?”

“Yes, he was a Salteador, who had been mortally wounded in a row with the citizens, and was being carried to the steps of the Cathedral, to die there.”

“Is that all?” the captain asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, my friend, I did well in insisting upon knowing the motives of your present uneasiness.”

“Ah!”

“Yes, for you have interpreted the omen in a very different way from what you should have done.”

“How so?”

“Let me explain: this foreboding signifies, on the contrary, that with prudence you will foil all treachery, and lay beneath your feet any bandits who dare to attack you.”

“Oh!” the arriero exclaimed, joyfully; “are you sure of what you assert?”

“As I am of salvation in the other world,” the captain replied, crossing himself fervently.

The arriero had a profound faith in the captain’s words; he did not dream, consequently, of doubting the assurance the latter gave him of the mistake he had made in the interpretation of the omen which had caused him such alarm.

“Carai, if that is the case, I run no risk; hence it is useless for me to give Nuestra Senora de la Soledad the wax taper I promised her.”

“Perfectly useless,” the captain assured him.

The arriero hastened to perform his ordinary duties.

In this way, the captain, by pretending to admit the ideas of this ignorant Indian, had led him quietly to abandon them.

By this time all were astir in the camp, the arrieros were rubbing down and loading the mules, while the troopers were saddling their horses and making all preparations for a start.

The captain watched all the movements with feverish energy, spurring some on, scolding others, and assuring himself that his orders were punctually carried out.

When all the preparations were completed, the young officer ordered that the morning meal should be eaten all standing, and with the bridle passed over the arm, in order to lose no time, and then gave the signal for departure.

The soldiers mounted, but at the moment when the column started, a loud noise was heard in the chapparal, the branches were violently pulled back, and a dragoon in uniform appeared a short distance from the party, toward which he advanced at a gallop.

On coming in front of the captain, he stopped and raised his hand respectfully to the peak of his forage cap.

"*Dios guarde a Vm!*" he said, "have I the honour of speaking with Captain Don Juan Melendez?"

"I am he," the captain answered in great surprise.

"I have a despatch from his most Excellent General Don José-Maria Rubio, and the contents of the despatch must be important, for the general ordered me to make the utmost diligence, and I have ridden forty-seven leagues in nineteen hours, in order to arrive more quickly."

"Good!" the captain answered; "give it here."

The dragoon drew from his bosom a large letter with a red seal, and respectfully offered it to the officer.

The latter took it and opened it, but, before reading it, he gave the motionless and impassive soldier before him a suspicious glance.

The man seemed to be about thirty years of age, tall and well built; he wore his uniform with a certain amount of ease; but his intelligent features had an expression of craft and cunning, rendered more marked still by his incessantly moving black eyes.

Sum total, this individual resembled all Mexican soldiers.

Still it was only with extreme repugnance that the captain saw himself compelled to enter into relations with him; the reason for this it would certainly have been very difficult, if not impossible, for him to say; but there are in nature certain laws which cannot be gainsayed, and which cause us at the mere sight of a person, and before he has even spoken, to feel a sympathy or antipathy for him, and be attracted or repulsed by him. Whence comes this species of secret presentiment which is never wrong in its appreciation? That we cannot explain: we merely confine ourselves to mentioning a fact, whose influence we have often undergone and efficacy recognised, during the course of our chequered life.

But the captain did not feel at all attracted toward the man, on the contrary, was disposed to place no confidence in him.

"At what place did you leave the general?" he asked.

"At Pozo-Redondo, a little in advance of the Noria de Guadalupe, captain."

"Who are you—what is your name?"

"I am the assistente of his most excellent general; my name is Gregoire Felpa."

"Do you know the contents of this despatch?"

"No; but I suppose it is important."

The soldier replied to the captain's questions with perfect freedom and frankness.

After a final hesitation, Don Juan made up his mind to read; but he soon began frowning, and an angry expression spread over his features.

This is what the despatch contained:

"*Pozo-Redondo.*

"General Don José-Maria Rubio, Supreme Military Commandant of the State of Texas, has the honour to inform Captain Don Juan Melendez de Gongora, that fresh troubles have broken out in the state; several parties of bandits and border-ruffians, under the orders of different chiefs, are going about the country pillaging and burning haciendas, stopping convoys, and interrupting the communications. In the presence of such grave facts, which compromise the public welfare and the safety of the inhabitants, the government, as their duty imperiously orders, have thought fit, in the interest of all, to take general measures to repress these disorders, before they break out on a larger scale. In consequence, Texas is declared under martial law—(here followed the measures adopted by the general to suppress the rebellion, and then the despatch went on as follows)—General Don José-Maria Rubio having been informed by spies, on whose devotion he can trust, that one of the principal insurgent chiefs, to whom his comrades have given the name of the Jaguar, is preparing to carry off the conducta de plata confided to the escort of Captain Don Juan Melendez de Gongora."

gora, and that for this purpose, the said cabecilla purposes to form an ambuscade on the Rio Seco, a spot favourable for a surprise; General Rubio orders Captain Melendez to let himself be guided by the bearer of the present despatch, a sure and devoted man, who will lead the conducta to the Laguna del Vernado, where this conducta will form a junction with a detachment of cavalry sent for the purpose, whose numerical strength will protect it from any aggression. Captain Melendez will take the command of the troops, and join the general at head-quarters with the least possible delay.

"Dios y libertad."

"The supreme Military General commanding in the State of Texas."

"DON JOSE-MARIA RUBIO."

After reading this despatch carefully, the captain raised his head and examined the soldier for an instant with the deepest and most earnest attention.

The latter, leaning on the hilt of his sword, was carelessly playing with its knot.

"The order is positive," the captain thought, "and I must obey it, although everything tells me that this man is a traitor."

Then he added aloud—

"Are you well acquainted with this part of the country?"

"I was born here, captain," the dragoon replied; "there is not a track I did not traverse in my youth."

"You know that you are to serve as my guide?"

"His Excellency the General did me the honour of telling me so, captain."

"And you feel certain of guiding us safe and sound to the spot where we are expected?"

"At least I will do all that is necessary."

"Good. Are you tired?"

"My horse is more so than I. If you would grant me another, I would be at your orders immediately, for I see that you are desirous of setting out."

"I am. Choose a horse."

The soldier did not let the order be repeated. Several remounts followed the escort, and he selected one of them, to which he transferred the saddle.

"I am at your Excellency's orders," he said.

"March," the captain shouted, and added mentally, "I will not let this scoundrel out of sight during the march."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE GUIDE.

MILITARY law is inflexible—it has its rules, from which it never departs, and discipline allows of neither hesitation nor tergiversation; the oriental axiom, so much in favour at despotic courts, "to hear is to obey," is rigorously true from a military point of view. Still, however hard this may appear at the first blush, it must be so, for if the right of discussion were granted inferiors with reference to the orders their superiors gave them, all discipline would be destroyed; the soldiers henceforth only obeying their caprices, would grow ungovernable, and the army, instead of rendering

the country the services which it has a right to expect from it, would speedily become a scourge.

These reflections, and many others, crossed the captain's mind, while he thoughtfully followed the guide whom his general's despatch had so singularly forced on him; but the order was clear and peremptory, he was obliged to obey, although he felt convinced that the man to whom he was compelled to trust was unworthy of confidence, if he were not an utter traitor.

As for the trooper, he galloped carelessly at the head of the caravan, smoking, laughing, singing, and not seeming to suspect the doubts entertained about him.

It is true that the captain carefully kept secret the ill opinion he had formed of the guide, and ostensibly placed the utmost confidence in him: for prudence demanded that in the critical situation in which the conducta was placed, those who composed it should not suspect their chief's anxiety, lest they might be demoralised by the fear of an impending treachery.

The captain, before starting, had given the most severe orders that the arms should be in a good state; he sent off scouts ahead, and on the flanks of the troops, to explore the neighbourhood, and be assured that the road was free, and no danger to be apprehended; in a word, he had taken most scrupulously all the measures prudence dictated.

The guide, who was an impassive witness of all these precautions, appeared to approve of them, and even drew attention to the skill the border-ruffians have in gliding through bushes and grass without leaving traces, and the care the scouts must devote to the accomplishment of the mission entrusted to them.

The further the conducta advanced in the direction of the mountains, the more difficult and dangerous the march became; the trees, at first scattered over a large space, became imperceptibly closer, and at last formed a dense forest, through which, at certain spots, they were compelled to cut their way with the axe, owing to the masses of creepers entwined in each other, and forming an inextricable tangle; then again, there were rather wide streams difficult of approach, which the horses and mules were obliged to ford, having frequently the water up to their girths.

The immense dome of verdure under which the caravan painfully advanced utterly hid the sky, and only allowed a few sunbeams to filter through the foliage, which was not sufficient entirely to dissipate the gloom which prevails almost constantly in the virgin forests, even at mid-day.

Europeans, who are only acquainted with the forests of the old world, cannot form even a remote idea of those immense oceans of verdure which in America are called virgin forests.

The most hardened wood-rangers enter the virgin forests unwillingly, for it is almost impossible to find one's way with certainty, and it is far from safe to trust to the tracks, which cross and are confounded; the hunters know by experience that once lost in one of these forests, unless a miracle supervene, they must perish within the walls formed by the tall grass and the curtain of lianas, without hope of being helped or saved by any living being of their own species.

It was a virgin forest the caravan now entered.

The guide, who pushed on, appeared perfectly sure of the road he followed, contenting himself by giving at lengthened intervals a glance to the right or left, but not once checking the pace of his horse.

It was nearly mid-day; the heat was growing stifling, the horses and men, who had been on the march since four in the morning, were exhausted with fatigue, and imperiously claimed a few hours' rest, which was indispensable before proceeding.

The captain resolved to let the troop camp in one of those vast clearings, so many of which are found in these parts, and are formed by the fall of trees overthrown by a hurricane, or dead of old age.

The command to halt was given. The soldiers and arrieros gave a sigh of relief, and stopped at once.

The captain, whose eyes were accidentally fixed at this moment on the guide, saw a cloud of dissatisfaction on his brow; still, feeling he was watched, the man at once recovered himself.

The horses and mules were unsaddled, that they might browse freely on the young shoots and grass.

The soldiers enjoyed their frugal meal, and lay down on their zarapés to sleep. Ere long the members of the caravan were slumbering, with the exception of two, the captain and the guide.

Probably each of them was troubled by thoughts sufficiently serious to drive away sleep and keep them awake when all wanted to repose.

A few paces from the clearing some monstrous iguanas were lying in the sun, wallowing in the greyish mud of a stream whose water ran with a slight murmur through the obstacles of every description that impeded its course. Myriads of insects filled the air with the continued buzzing of their wings; squirrels leaped gaily from branch to branch; the birds, hidden beneath the foliage, were singing cheerily, and here and there above the tall grass might be seen the elegant head and startled eyes of a deer or an ashata, which suddenly rushed beneath the covert with a low of terror.

But the two men were too much occupied with their thoughts to notice what was going on around them.

The captain raised his head at the very moment when the guide had fixed on him a glance of strange meaning: confused at being thus taken unawares, he tried to deceive the officer by speaking to him—old-fashioned tactics, however, by which the latter was not duped.

"It is a hot day, excellency," he said.

"Yes," the captain answered, laconically.

"Do you not feel any inclination for sleep?"

"No."

"For my part, I feel my eyelids extraordinarily heavy, and my eyes close against my will; with your permission I will follow the example of our comrades."

"One moment—I have something to say to you."

"Very good," he said, quietly.

He rose, stifling a sigh of regret, and seated himself by the captain's side, who withdrew to make room for him under the protecting shadow of the large tree which stretched its giant arms out above his head.

"We are about to talk seriously," the captain went on.

"As you please."

"Can you be frank?"

"What?" the soldier said, thrown off his guard.

"Or if you prefer it, can you be honest?"

"That depends."

The captain looked at him.

"Will you answer my questions?"

"I do not know."

"What do you say?"

"Listen, excellency," the guide said, with a simple look; "my mother, worthy woman that she was, always recommended me to distrust two sorts of people—borrowers and questioners, for she said, with considerable sense, the first attack your purse, the others your secrets."

"Then you have a secret?"

"Not much of a one. Well, question me, excellency, and I will try to answer you."

The Mexican peasant, the Manzo or civilised Indian—has a good deal of the Norman peasant about him, in so far as it is impossible to obtain from him a positive answer to any question asked him. The captain went on :

"Who are you?"

"I?"

"Yes, you."

The guide began laughing.

"You can see plainly enough," he said.

The captain shook his head.

"I do not ask you what you appear to be, but what you really are."

"Why, senor, what man can answer for himself, and know positively who he is?"

"Listen, scoundrel," the captain continued, in a menacing tone; "I do not mean to lose my time in following you through all the stories you may think proper to invent. Answer my questions plainly, or, if not—"

"If not?" the guide impudently interrupted him.

"I blow out your brains like a dog's!" he replied, as he drew a pistol from his belt, and hastily cocked it.

The soldier's eye flashed fire, but his features remained impassive, and not a muscle of his face stirred.

"Oh, oh, senor captain," he said, in a sombre voice, "you have a particular way of questioning your friends."

"Who assures me that you are a friend? I do not know you."

"That is true; but you know the person who sent me to you. I obeyed your chief, as you ought to obey him by following the orders he has given you."

"Yes; but these orders were sent me through you."

"What matter?"

"Who guarantees that the despatch you have brought me was really handed to you?"

"Caramba, captain, what you say is anything but flattering to me," the guide replied.

"I know it; unhappily we live at a time when it is so difficult to distinguish friends from foes, that I cannot take too many precautions to avoid falling into a snare."

"You are right, captain; hence, in spite of the offensive nature of your suspicions, I will not be affronted by what you say. Still, I will strive by my conduct to prove to you how mistaken you are."

"I shall be glad if I am mistaken; but take care. If I perceive anything doubtful, either in your actions or your words, I shall not hesitate to blow out your brains."

"Very good, captain, I will run the risk. Whatever happens, I feel certain that my conscience will absolve me, for I shall have acted for the best."

This was said with an air of frankness which, in spite of his suspicions, had its effect on the captain.

"We shall see," he said; "shall we soon get out of this infernal forest in which we are now?"

"In two hours' march."

"May Heaven grant it!" the captain murmured.

"Amen!" the soldier said boldly.

"Still, as you have not thought proper to answer any of the questions I asked you, you must not feel offended if I do not let you out of sight from this moment."

"You can do as you please, captain; you have the power, if not the right, on your side."

"Very good, now you can sleep if you think proper."

"Then you have nothing more to say to me?"

"Nothing."

"In that case I will avail myself of the permission you are kind enough to grant me."

The soldier then rose, stifling a long yawn, walked a few paces off, lay down on the ground, and seemed within a few minutes plunged in a deep sleep.

The captain remained awake. The conversation he had held with his guide only increased his anxiety, by proving to him that this man concealed great cunning beneath an abrupt and trivial manner. In fact, he had not answered one of the questions asked him, and after a few minutes had succeeded in making the captain turn from the offensive to the defensive.

Don Juan was, therefore, at this moment in the worst temper a man of honour can be in, who is dissatisfied with himself and others, fully convinced that he was in the right, but compelled, to a certain extent, to allow himself in the wrong.

The soldiers, as generally happens in such cases, suffered from their chief's ill-temper: for the officer, afraid of adding darkness to the chances he fancied he had against him, and not at all desirous to be surprised by night in the forest, cut the halt short much sooner than he would otherwise have done.

At about two o'clock P.M. he ordered the boot and saddle to be sounded, and gave the word to start.

The greatest heat of the day had passed over, the sunbeams, being more oblique, had lost a great deal of their power, and the march was continued under better conditions than those which preceded it.

As he had warned him, the captain intimated to the guide that he was to ride by his side, and, so far as was possible, did not let him out of sight for a second.

The latter did not appear at all troubled by this annoying inquisition; he rode along quite as gaily as heretofore, smoking his husk cigarette.

The forest began gradually to grow clearer, the openings became more numerous, and the eye embraced a wider horizon; all led to the presumption that they would soon reach the limits of the covert.

Still, the ground began rising slightly on both sides, and the path the conducta followed grew more and more hollow, in proportion as it advanced.

"Are we already reaching the spurs of the mountain?" the captain asked.

"Oh, no, not yet," the guide answered.

"Still we shall soon be between two hills?"

"Yes, but of no height."

"True; but, if I am not mistaken, we shall have to pass through a defile. You should have warned me."

"Why so?"

"That I might have sent some scouts ahead."

"That is true, but there is still time to do so if you like; the persons who are waiting for us are at the end of that gorge."

"Then we have arrived?"

"Very nearly so."

"Let us push on in that case."

"I am quite ready."

The captain advanced; all at once the guide stopped.

"Hilloh!" he said, "look over there, captain; is not that a musket-barrel glistening in the sunbeams?"

The captain sharply turned his eyes in the direction indicated by the soldier.

At the same moment a frightful discharge burst forth from either side of the way.

Before the captain, furious at this shameful treachery, could draw a pistol from his

belt, he rolled on the ground, dragged down by his horse, which had a ball right through its heart.

The guide had disappeared, and it was impossible to discover how he had escaped.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

JOHN DAVIS.

JOHN DAVIS, the ex-slave-dealer, had too powerful nerves for the scenes he had witnessed, and in which he had even played a very active part, to leave any durable impressions on his mind.

After quitting Blue-fox, he galloped on for some time in the direction where he expected to find the Jaguar; but gradually he yielded to his thoughts, and his horse, understanding with that admirable instinct which distinguishes these noble animals, that its rider was paying no attention to it, gradually reduced its pace, passing from the gallop to a trot, and then to a foot-pace, walking with its head down, and snapping at a few blades of grass as it passed.

John Davis was considerably perplexed by the conduct of one of the persons with whom accident had brought him in contact that morning. The person who had the privilege of arousing the American's attention to an eminent degree was the White Scalper.

The heroic struggle sustained by this man against a swarm of obstinate enemies, his herculean strength, the skill with which he managed his horse—all seemed to him to border on the marvellous.

During bivouac-watches on the prairie he had frequently heard the most extraordinary and exaggerated stories told about this hunter by the Indians with a terror, the reason of which he comprehended, now that he had seen the man; for this individual who laughed at weapons directed against his chest, and emerged safe and sound from all the combats he engaged in, seemed rather a demon than a being appertaining to humanity. John Davis felt himself shudder involuntarily at this thought, and congratulated himself in having so miraculously escaped the danger he had incurred in his encounter with the Scalper.

We will mention, in passing, that no people in the world are more superstitious than the North Americans. This is easy to understand: this nation—a perfect harlequin's garb—is an heterogeneous composite of all the races that people the old world; each of the representatives of these races arrived in America, bearing in his emigrant's baggage not only his vices and passions, but also his creed and his superstitions, which are the wildest, most absurd, and puerile possible. This was the more easily effected, because the mass of emigrants, who have at various periods sought a refuge in America, was composed of people for the most part devoid of all learning, or even of a semblance of education; from this point of view, the North Americans, we must do them the justice of saying, have not at all degenerated; they are at the present day at least as ignorant and brutal as were their ancestors.

It is easy to imagine the strange number of legends about sorcerers and phantoms which are current in North America. These legends, preserved by tradition, passing from mouth to mouth, and with time becoming mingled one with the other, have necessarily been heightened in a country where the grand aspect of nature renders the mind prone to reverie and melancholy.

John Davis, though he flattered himself he was a strong-minded man, like most

of his countrymen, possessed a strong dose of credulity; and this man, who would not have recoiled at the sight of several muskets pointed at his breast, felt himself shiver with fear at the sound of a leaf falling at night on his shoulder.

Moreover, so soon as the idea occurred to John Davis that the White Scalper was a demon, or, at the very least, a sorcerer, it became an article of belief with him. Naturally, he found himself at once relieved by this discovery; his ideas returned to their usual current, and the anxiety that occupied his mind disappeared as if by enchantment; henceforth his opinion was formed about this man, and if accident again brought them face to face, he would know how to behave to him.

Happy at having at length found this solution, he gaily raised his head, and took a long searching look around him at the landscape he was riding through.

He was in the centre of a vast rolling prairie, covered with tall grass, and with a few clumps of mahogany and pine trees scattered here and there.

Suddenly he rose in his stirrups, placed his hand as a shade over his eyes, and looked attentively.

About half a mile from the spot where he had halted, and a little to the right, that is say, exactly in the direction he intended to follow himself, he noticed a thin column of smoke.

On the desert, smoke seen by the wayside always furnishes ample matter for reflection; it generally rises from a fire round which several persons are seated.

Now man, in this more unfortunate than the wild beasts, fears, before all else on the prairie, meeting with his fellow-man.

Still John Davis, after ripe consideration, resolved to push on toward the fire; since morning he had been fasting, hunger was beginning to prick him, and in addition he felt excessively fatigued; he therefore inspected his weapons with the most scrupulous attention, so as to be able to have recourse to them if necessary, and digging the spur into his horse's flank, he went on boldly toward the smoke.

At the end of ten minutes he reached his destination; but when fifty yards from the clump of trees, he checked the speed of his horse, and laid his rifle across the saddle-bow; his face lost the anxious expression which had covered it, and he advanced toward the fire with a smile on his lips and the most friendly air imaginable.

In the midst of a thick clump of trees, whose protecting shade offered a comfortable shelter to a weary traveller, a man dressed in the costume of a Mexican dragoon was lazily seated in front of a fire, over which his meat was cooking, while himself smoked a husk cigarette. A long lance, decorated with its guidon, leaned against a larch tree close to him, and a completely harnessed horse, from which the bit had, however, been removed, was peaceably nibbling the tree-shoots and the tender prairie grass.

This man was about twenty-seven years of age; his cunning features were lit up by small sharp eyes, and the copper tinge of his skin denoted his Indian origin.

He had for a long time seen the horseman coming toward his camp, but quietly went on smoking and watching the cooking of his meal, not taking any further precaution against the unforeseen visitor than assuring himself that his sabre came easily out of its scabbard. When he was only a few paces from the soldier, John Davis stopped and raised his hand to his hat.

"Ave Maria purissima!" he said.

"Sin peccado concebida!" the dragoon answered.

"Santas tardes!" the new comer went on.

"Dios las de a Vm buenas!" the other answered.

These necessary formulas of every meeting exhausted, the ice was broken, and the acquaintance made.

"Dismount, caballero," the dragoon said; "the heat is stifling on the prairie; I

have here a famous shade, and in this little pot some cecina, with red harico beans and pimento, which I think you will like, if you do me the honour to share my repast."

"I readily accept your flattering invitation, caballero," the American answered; "the more readily because I confess to you that I am literally starving."

"Carai! in that case I congratulate myself on the fortunate accident that occasions our meeting; so pray dismount without further delay."

"I am going to do so."

The American at once got off his horse, removed the bit, and the noble animal immediately joined its companion, while its master fell to the ground by the dragoon's side, with a sigh of satisfaction.

"You seem to have made a long ride, caballero?"

"Yes," the American answered, "I have been on horseback for ten hours, not to mention that I spent the morning in fighting."

"Cristo! you have had hard work of it."

"You may say so; for on the word of a hunter, I never had such a tough job."

"You are a hunter?"

"At your service."

"A fine profession," the soldier said with a sigh; "I have been one too."

"And you regret it?"

"Daily."

"I can understand that. Once a man has tasted the joys of desert life, he always wishes to return to it."

"Alas! that is true."

"Why did you give it up, since you liked it so much?"

"Ah, why!" the soldier said; "through love."

"What do you mean?"

"Yes, a child with whom I was so foolish as to fall in love, and who persuaded me to enlist."

"Oh, hang it!"

"Yes, and I had scarce put on my uniform, when she told me she was mistaken about me; that, thus dressed, I was much uglier than she could have supposed; in short, she left me in the lurch to run after an arriero."

The American could not refrain from laughing.

"It is sad, is it not?" the soldier continued.

"Very sad," John Davis answered.

"What would you have?" the soldier added gloomily; "the world is only one huge deception. But," he added, "I fancy our dinner is ready—I smell something which warns me that it is time to take off the pot."

John Davis had naturally no objection to offer to this resolution of the soldier; the latter at once carried it into effect; the pot was taken off the fire and placed before the two guests, who began such a vigorous attack, that it was soon empty, in spite of its decent capacity.

The excellent meal was washed down with a few mouthfuls of refino, with which the soldier was amply provided.

All was terminated with the indispensable cigarette, and the two men, revived by the good food with which they had lined their stomachs, were soon in an excellent condition to talk.

"You seem to me a man of caution, caballero," the American remarked, as he puffed out an immense mouthful of smoke.

"It is a reminiscence of my old hunter's trade. Soldiers generally are not so careful as I am."

"The more I observe of you," John Davis went on, "the more extraordinary does

it appear to me that you should have consented to take up a profession so badly paid as that of a soldier."

"What would you have? it is fatality. However, I hope to be made a *Cabo* before the year's out."

"That is a fine position, as I have heard; the pay must be good."

"It would not be bad, if we received it."

"What do you mean?"

"It seems that the government is not rich."

"Then you give it credit?"

"We are obliged to do so."

"Hang it! but forgive me for asking you all these questions, which must appear to you indiscreet."

"Not at all; we are talking as friends."

"Then how do you live?"

"Well, we have casualties."

"What may they be?"

"Do you not know?"

"Indeed, I do not."

"I will explain."

"You will cause me pleasure."

"Well, sometimes our captain or general entrusts us with a mission."

"Very good."

"This mission is paid for separately; the more dangerous it is, the larger the amount."

"Still on credit?"

"No! hang it, in advance."

"That is better. And you have many of these missions?"

"Frequently, especially during a pronunciamiento."

"Yes, but for nearly a year no general has pronounced."

"Unluckily."

"Then you are quite dry?"

"Not quite."

"You have had missions?"

"I have one at this moment, for which I have received twenty-five ounces."

"Cristo! that is a nice sum. The mission must be a dangerous one to be paid so highly."

"It is not without peril, though I have only to deliver a letter."

"Only!" the American remarked.

"Oh! this one is more important than you fancy it."

"Nonsense!"

"On my honour it is, for it concerns some millions of dollars."

"What is that you say?" John Davis exclaimed with an involuntary start.

Since his meeting with the soldier, the hunter had quietly worked to get him to reveal the reason that brought him into these parts, for the presence of a single dragoon on the desert seemed to him queer, and for good reason.

"Yes," the soldier continued, "General Rubio, whose assistente I am, has sent me as an express to meet Captain Melendez, who at this moment is escorting a *conducta de plata*."

"Do you mean that really?"

"Do I not tell you that I have the letter about me?"

"That is true; but for what purpose does the general write to the captain?"

The soldier looked for a moment cunningly at the hunter, and then suddenly changed his tone.

"Will you play fair?" he asked.

The hunter smiled.

"Good," the soldier continued; "I see that we can understand one another."

"Why not? those are the conditions that suit caballeros."

"Then, we play fair?"

"That is agreed."

"Confess that you would like to know the contents of this letter."

"Through simple curiosity, I swear to you."

"Of course! I felt assured of that. Well, it only depends on yourself to know them."

"I will not take long then; let me hear your conditions."

"They are simple."

"Tell me them for all that."

"Look at me carefully; do you not recognise me?"

"On my honour, I do not."

"That proves to me that I have a better memory than you."

"It is possible."

"I recognise you."

"You may have seen me somewhere."

"Very likely, but that is of little consequence; the main point is that I should know who you are."

"Oh, a simple hunter."

"Yes, and an intimate friend of the Jaguar."

"What!" the hunter exclaimed.

"Do not be frightened at such a trifle: answer me simply; is it so or not?"

"It is true; I do not see why I should hide the fact."

"You would be wrong if you did. Where is the Jaguar at this moment?"

"I do not know."

"That is to say, you will not tell me."

"You have guessed it."

"Good. Could you tell me, if I wished you to lead me to him?"

"I see no reason to prevent it, if the affair is worth your while."

"Have I not told you that it related to millions?"

"You did, but you did not prove it."

"And you wish me to give you that proof,"

"Nothing else."

"That is rather difficult."

"No, it is not."

"How so?"

"Hang it, I am a good fellow; I only want to cover my responsibility; show me the letter, I ask no more."

"And that will satisfy you?"

"Yes, because I know the general's handwriting."

"Oh, in that case, it is all right," and drawing a large envelope from his breast, he showed it to the American.

The latter looked at it closely for some minutes.

"It is really the general's handwriting," the soldier continued.

"Yes."

"Now, do you consent to lead me to the Jaguar?"

"Whenever you like."

"At once, then."

"Very good."

The two men rose by mutual agreement, put the bits in their horses' mouths, leaped into their saddles, and left at a gallop the spot which for several hours had afforded them such pleasant shade.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE BARGAIN.

THE two adventurers rode gaily side by side, telling one another the news of the desert, that is to say, hunting exploits and skirmishes with the Indians, and conversing about the political events which for some months past had attained a certain gravity.

But, while thus talking, asking each other questions, the answers to which they did not wait to hear, their conversation had no other object save to conceal the secret preoccupation that agitated them.

In their previous discussion, each had tried to overreach the other, trying to draw out secrets, the hunter manoeuvring to lead the soldier to an act of treachery, the latter asking no better than to sell himself, and acting in accordance with his wishes; the result of the trial was that they had found themselves of equal force, and each had obtained the result he so earnestly wanted.

But this was no longer the question with them; like all crafty men, success, instead of satisfying them, had given birth in their minds to a multitude of suspicions. John Davis asked himself what cause had led the dragoon to betray his party so easily, without stipulating beforehand for important advantages for himself.

For everything is paid for in Spanish America, and infamy especially commands a high price.

On his side the dragoon found that the hunter put faith in his statements very easily, and, in spite of his comrade's affectionate manner, the nearer he approached the camp of the Border Rifles, the more his uneasiness increased; for he was beginning to fear lest he had gone head first into a snare and had trusted too imprudently to a man whose reputation was far from reassuring him.

Such was the state of mind in which the two men stood to each other, scarce an hour after leaving the spot where they had met so accidentally.

Still, each carefully hid his apprehensions in his heart; nothing was visible on the exterior; on the contrary, they redoubled their politeness and obsequiousness toward each other, behaving like brothers delighted to have met after a long separation.

The sun had set about an hour, and it was quite dark when they came within a short distance of the Jaguar's camp, whose bivouac fires flashed out of the gloom, imprinting on the rugged scenery of the prairie a stamp of savage majesty.

"We have arrived," the hunter said, as he stopped his horse; "no one has perceived us; you can still turn back without fear of pursuit."

"Canarios! comrade," the soldier answered, shrugging his shoulders; "I have not come so far to shiver at the entrance of the camp, and, allow me to remark, your words appear to me singular at the least."

"I owed it to myself to speak; who knows whether you may not repent the hazardous step you are taking?"

"That is possible. Well, what would you have? I will run the risk; my determination is formed."

"As you please, caballero; within a quarter of an hour you will be in the presence of the man you desire to see, and you will have an explanation with him."

"And I shall have nothing but thanks to offer you," the soldier said; "but let us not remain any longer here; we may attract attention, and become the mark for a bullet."

The hunter, without replying, let his horse feel the spur, and they continued to advance.

Within a few minutes they entered the circle of light cast by the fire; almost immediately the sharp click of a rifle being cocked was heard, and a rough voice ordered them to stop in the devil's name.

The order, though not polite, was peremptory, and the two adventurers obeyed.

Several armed men then issued from the intrenchments; and one of them, addressing the strangers, asked them who they were, and what they wanted at such an unseasonable hour.

"Who are we?" the American answered, firmly; "what we want? To come in as quickly as we can."

"That is all very fine," the other replied; "but, if you do not tell us your names, you will not enter so soon, especially as one of you wears a uniform which is not in odour of sanctity with us."

"All right, Ruperto," the American replied; "I am John Davis. I answer for this caballero, who has an important communication to make to the chief."

"You are welcome, Master John; do not be angry; you know that prudence is the mother of safety."

"Yes, yes," the American said; "deuce take me if you will get into a scrape for lack of prudence."

They then entered the camp without further obstacle.

The Border Rifles were chiefly sleeping round the fires, but a cordon of vigilant sentries watched over the common security.

John Davis dismounted, inviting his comrade to follow; then making him a sign, he walked toward a tent, through the canvas of which a light could be seen.

On reaching the entrance of the tent, the hunter stopped, and tapped twice.

"Are you asleep, Jaguar?" he asked, in a suppressed voice.

"Is that you, Davis, my old comrade?" was immediately asked from within.

"Yes."

"Come in, for I was impatiently waiting for you."

The American raised the curtain which covered the entrance, and glided in; the soldier followed him gently, the curtain fell down behind them.

The Jaguar, seated on a buffalo-skull, was reading a voluminous correspondence by the dubious light of a *candil*; and in a corner of the tent might be seen two or three bear-skins, evidently intended to serve as a bed. On seeing the new comers, the young man folded up the papers, and laid them in a small iron casket, the key of which he placed in his bosom, then raised his head, and looked anxiously at the soldier.

"Who's this, John?" he asked; "have you brought prisoners?"

"No," the other answered; "this caballero was most desirous of seeing you, for certain reasons he will himself explain."

"Good; we will settle with him in a moment. What have you done?"

"What you ordered me."

"Then you have succeeded?"

"Completely."

"Bravo, my friend! tell me all about it."

"What need of details?" the American answered, looking meaningly at the dragoon.

The Jaguar understood him.

"That is true," he said; "suppose we see of what sort of stuff this man is made;" and addressing the soldier, he added, "Come hither, my good fellow."

"Here I am, at your orders, captain."

"What is your name?"

"Gregorio Felpa. I am a dragoon, as you can see by my uniform, excellency."

"What is your motive for wishing to see me?"

"An anxiety to render you an important service."

"I thank you, but usually services are confoundedly dear, and I am not a rich man."

"You may become so."

"I hope so. But what is the great service you propose to render me?"

"I will explain to you in two words. In every political question there are two sides, and that depends on the point of view from which you regard it. I am a child of Texas, son of a North American and an Indian woman, which means that I cordially detest the Spaniards."

"Come to facts."

"I am doing so. General Rubio has entrusted me with a dispatch for Captain Melendez, in which he tells him to avoid the Rio Seco, where the report runs that you intend to ambush."

"Ah, ah," the Jaguar said, becoming very attentive, "but how do you know the contents of the dispatch?"

"In a very simple way. The general places the utmost confidence in me; and he read me the dispatch, because I am to serve as the captain's guide."

"Then you are betraying your chief?"

"Is that the name you give my action?"

"I am looking at it from the general's side."

"And from yours?"

"When we have succeeded I will tell you."

"Good," he carelessly replied.

"You have this dispatch?"

"Here it is."

The Jaguar took it, examined it attentively, turning it over and over, and then prepared to break the seal.

"Stop!" the soldier hurriedly exclaimed.

"What for?"

"Because, if you open it, I cannot deliver it to the man for whom it is intended."

"What do you mean?"

"You do not understand me," the soldier said, with ill-concealed impatience.

"That is probable," the captain answered.

"I only ask you to listen to me for five minutes."

"Speak."

"The meeting-place appointed for the captain and the general is the Laguna del Venado. Before reaching the laguna there is a very narrow gorge."

"The Paso de Palo Muerto; I know it."

"Good. You will hide yourself there, on the right and left, in the bushes; and when the conducta passes, you will attack it on all sides at once; it is impossible for it to escape you."

"Yes, the spot is most favourable for an attack. But who guarantees that the conducta will pass through this gorge?"

"I do."

"What do you mean?"

"Certain'y, as I shall act as guide."

"Hum! we no longer understand one another."

"Excuse me, we do, perfectly. I will leave you, and go to the captain, to whom I will deliver the general's dispatch; he will be compelled to take me for his guide, whether he likes it or not; I will lead him to the shambles."

The Jaguar gave the soldier a glance which seemed trying to read the bottom of his heart.

"You are a daring fellow," he said to him, "but I fancy you settle events a little too much as you would like them. I do not know you; I see you to-day for the first time, and, excuse my frankness, it is to arrange an act of treachery. Who answers for your good faith?"

"My own interest; if you seize the conducta by my aid, you will give me five hundred ounces."

"That is not too dear; still, allow me to make a further objection."

"Do so, excellency."

"Nothing proves to me that you have not been promised double the amount to trap me."

"Oh!" he said, with a shake of the head.

"Hang it all! listen to me; more singular things than that have been known, and though my head may be worth little, I confess to you that I have the weakness of attaching remarkable value to it; hence I warn you, that unless you have better security to offer, the affair is broken off."

"That would be a pity."

"I am well aware of that, but it is your fault, not mine; you should have taken your measures better."

"Then nothing can convince you of my good faith?"

"Nothing."

"Come, we must have an end of this!" the soldier exclaimed, impatiently.

"I ask for nothing better."

"It is clearly understood between us, excellency, that you will give me five hundred ounces."

"If by your aid I carry off the conducta de plata."

"That is enough; I know that you never break your word."

He then unbuttoned his uniform, drew out a bag hung round his neck by a steel chain, and offered it to the captain.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked him.

"Certainly," the Jaguar replied, crossing himself fervently; "it is a relic."

"Blessed by the Pope! as this attestation proves."

"It is true."

He took it from his neck, and laid it in the young man's hand, then crossing his right thumb over the left, he said, in a firm and marked voice—

"I, Gregorio Felpa, swear on this relic to accomplish faithfully all the clauses of the bargain I have just concluded with the noble captain called the Jaguar: if I break this oath, I renounce from this day and for ever the place I hope for in paradise, and devote myself to the eternal flames of hell. Now," he added, "keep that precious relic; you will restore it to me on my return."

The captain, without replying, immediately hung it round his own neck.

Strange contradiction of the human heart, and inexplicable anomaly; these Indians, for the most part pagans, in spite of the baptism they have received, and who, while affecting to follow ostensibly the rules of the Catholic religion, secretly practise the rites of their worship, have a lively faith in relics and amulets; all wear them round their necks in little bags, and these perverse and dissolute men, to whom nothing is sacred, who laugh at the most noble feelings, whose life is passed

in inventing roguery and preparing acts of treachery, profess so great a respect for these relics, that there is no instance of an oath taken on one of them having ever been broken.

Any one who pleases may explain this extraordinary fact.

Before the oath taken by the soldier, the Jaguar's suspicions at once faded away.

The conversation lost the stiff tone it had taken up to the present, the soldier sat down on a buffalo-skull, and the three men, henceforth in good harmony, quietly discussed the best means to be employed.

The plan proposed by the soldier was so simple that it guaranteed success; hence it was adopted entirely, the discussion only turning on points of detail.

At a rather late hour of the night the three men at length separated, in order to take a few moments of indispensable rest between the fatigue of the past day and that they would have to endure on the morrow.

Gregorio slept straight off the reel.

About two hours before sunrise the Jaguar bent over the sleeper and awoke him; the soldier rose at once, rubbed his eyes for an instant, and at the end of five minutes was as fresh and ready as if he had been asleep for eight-and-forty hours.

"It is time to start," the Jaguar said, in a low voice; "John Davis has himself rubbed down and saddled your horse; come."

They left the tent; they found the American holding the soldier's bridle, and the latter leaped into the saddle without using his stirrups, in order to show that he was quite fresh.

"Mind," the Jaguar observed, "that you employ the utmost prudence; watch your words and your gestures carefully, for you are about to deal with the most skillful officer in the whole Mexican army."

"Trust to me, captain. Canarios! the stake is too large for me to run any risk of losing the game."

"One word more."

"I am listening."

"Manage not to reach the gorge till nightfall, for darkness goes a great way toward the success of a surprise—and now good-bye and good luck."

"I wish you the same."

The Jaguar and the American escorted the dragoon to the barrier, in order to pass him through the sentries, who, had not this precaution been taken, would have infallibly fired at him, owing to the uniform he wore.

When he had left the camp, the two men looked after him so long as they could distinguish his dark outline gliding like a shadow through the trees of the forest, where it speedily disappeared.

"Hum!" said John Davis, "that is what I call a thorough scoundrel; a fearful villain!"

"Well, my friend," the Jaguar answered, "men of that stamp are necessary."

"That is true. They are as necessary as the plague and leprosy; but I stick to what I said: he is the most unmitigated scoundrel I ever saw; and the Lord knows the magnificent collection I have come across during the course of my life!"

A few minutes later the Border Rifles raised their camp and mounted to proceed to the gorge, where the rendezvous had been made with Gregorio Felpa.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE AMBUSCADE.

THE Jaguar's measures were so well taken, and the traitor to whom the guidance of the conducta was entrusted had manoeuvred so cleverly, that the Mexicans fell literally into a wasps' nest, from which it was very difficult, if not impossible, for them to escape.

Although demoralised for a moment by the fall of their chief, whose horse was killed at the beginning of the action, they still obeyed the captain's voice, and, by a supreme effort, rose almost simultaneously, and collected round the string of mules laden with the treasure. They formed a square, and prepared to defend the precious depot they had under their guard.

The escort commanded by Captain Melendez, though not large, was composed of tried soldiers, long habituated to bush-fighting, and to whom the critical position in which their unlucky star had brought them appeared nothing very extraordinary.

The dragoons had dismounted, and throwing away their long lances, useless in a fight like the one that was preparing, seized their carbines, and with their eyes fixed on the bushes, calmly awaited the order to begin firing.

Captain Melendez studied the ground with a hurried glance, and it was far from being favourable. On the right and left steep slopes, crowned by enemies; in the rear, a large party of Border Rifles ambushed behind a barricade of trees, which, as if by enchantment, suddenly interrupted the road, and prevented a retreat; lastly, in front, a precipice about twenty yards in width, of incalculable depth.

All hope, therefore, of getting safe and sound out of the position in which they were beset seemed lost, not only through the considerable number of enemies that surrounded them, but also through the nature of the battle-field; still, after carefully examining it, a flash burst from the captain's eye and a gloomy smile passed over his face.

The dragoons had known their commander a long time; they placed faith in him; they perceived this fugitive smile, and their courage was heightened.

As the captain had smiled, he must have hopes.

It is true that not a man in the whole escort could have said in what that hope consisted.

After the first discharge the bandits crowded the heights, but remained there motionless, satisfying themselves with watching the movements of the Mexicans.

The captain profited by the respite to take a few defensive measures, and amend his plan of battle.

The mules were unloaded, and the precious boxes placed right away at the rear, as far as possible from the enemy; then the horses and mules, led to the front, were arranged so that their bodies should serve as a rampart for the soldiers, who, kneeling and stooping behind this living breastwork, found themselves completely sheltered from the enemy's bullets.

When these measures were taken, and the captain had assured himself by a final glance that his orders were punctually executed, he bent down to the ear of the chief arriero, and whispered a few words.

The arriero gave a quick start of surprise on hearing the captain's words, but recovered himself immediately, and bowed his head in assent.

"You will obey?" Don Juan asked.

"On my honour, captain," the arriero answered.

"Very good," the young man said gaily; "we shall have some fun, I promise you."

The arriero fell back, and the captain placed himself in front of the soldiers. He had scarce taken up his position, when a man appeared at the top of the right hand bank; he held in his hand a long lance, from the end of which fluttered a piece of white rag.

"Oh, oh," said the captain, "what is the meaning of this? Are they beginning to fear lest their prey may escape? Hilloh," he shouted, "what do you want?"

"To parley," the man with the flag answered.

"Parley," the captain answered, "what good will that do? besides, I have the honour of being a captain in the Mexican army, and do not treat with bandits."

"Take care, captain; misplaced courage is frequently braggadocio; your position is desperate."

"Do you think so?" the young man said.

"You are surrounded on all sides."

"Bar one."

"Yes, but there is an impassable abyss there."

"Who knows?" the captain said, still mockingly.

"In a word, will you listen to me?" the other said.

"Well," the officer said, "let me hear your propositions, after which I will let you know my conditions."

"What conditions?" the bandit asked in amazement.

"Those I intend to impose on you, by Jove."

A laugh from the Border Rifles greeted these haughty words. The captain remained cold and impassive.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"The chief of the men who hold you imprisoned."

"Prisoners? I do not believe it; however, we shall see. Ah! you must be the Jaguar, whose name is held in execration on this border?"

"I am the Jaguar," the latter answered simply.

"Very good. What do you want with me? Speak, and, before all, be brief," the captain said.

"I wish to avoid bloodshed," the Jaguar said.

"That is very kind of you, but I fancy it is rather late to form so laudable a resolve," the officer said.

"Listen, captain; you are a brave officer, and I should be sorry if any misfortune happened to you; do not obstinately carry on a useless struggle, surrounded as you are by an imposing force; any attempt at resistance would be an unpardonable act of madness, which could only result in a general massacre of the men you command, while you would not have the slightest hope of saving the conducta under your escort. Surrender, therefore, I repeat."

"Caballero," the captain said, "I thank you for your words; I am a connoisseur in men, and see that you are speaking honourably at this moment."

"I am," said the Jaguar.

"Unfortunately," the captain continued, "I am forced to repeat to you that I have the honour to be an officer, and would never consent to deliver my sword to the leader of banditti, for whose head a price is offered. If I have been mad and idiotic enough to let myself be drawn into a trap, all the worse for me."

The two speakers had by this time come together, and were conversing side by side.

"I can understand, captain, that your military honour must, under certain circum-

stances, compel you to fight; but here the case is different—all the chances are against you, and your honour will in no way suffer by a capitulation which will save human life."

"And deliver to you the rich prey you covet."

"Whatever you may do, that prey cannot escape me."

The captain shrugged his shoulders.

"You are mistaken," he said; "like all men accustomed to prairie warfare, you have been too clever, and your adroitness has carried you beyond your object."

"What do you mean?"

"Learn to know me, caballero; I am a cristiano viejo; I am descended from the old Conquistadors, and the Spanish blood flows pure in my veins. All my men are devoted to me, and at my order they will let themselves be killed to the last; but, whatever may be the advantages of the situation you occupy, and the number of your companions, you will require a certain time to kill fifty men reduced to desperation."

"Yes," the Jaguar said in a hollow voice; "but in the end they will be killed."

"Of course," the captain replied calmly; "but while you are murdering us, the arrieros have my positive orders to cast the money-chests to the bottom of the abyss, to the brink of which you have forced us."

"Oh," the Jaguar said with an ill-restrained look of menace, "you will not do that."

"Why should I not?" the officer said coldly.

"Oh!"

"What will happen, then? You will have brutally murdered fifty men, with no other result than that of wallowing in the blood of your countrymen."

"Rayo de Dios! this is madness."

"Not at all; it is simply the logical consequence of the threat you make me; we shall be dead, but the money will be saved."

"All my efforts, then, to bring about a peaceful settlement are sterile."

"There is one way."

"What is it?"

"To let us pass, after pledging your word of honour not to molest our retreat."

"Never! That money is indispensable to me, and I must have it."

"Come and take it, then."

"That is what I am going to do."

"Very good."

"The blood I wished to spare will fall on your head."

"Or on yours."

They separated.

The captain turned to his soldiers, who had been near enough to follow the discussion.

"What will you do, lads?" he asked them,

"Die!" they answered in a loud and firm voice.

"Be it so—we will die together;" and brandishing his sabre over his head, he shouted, "*Dios y libertad! Viva Mejico!*"

"*Viva Mejico!*" the dragoons repeated, enthusiastically.

While this had been going on, the sun had disappeared below the horizon, and darkness covered the earth, like a sombre winding-sheet.

The Jaguar, with rage in his heart at the ill success of his tentatives, had rejoined his comrades.

"Well," John Davis asked him, who was anxiously watching for his return, "what have you obtained?"

"Nothing. That man is a fanatic."

"As I warned you, he is a demon; fortunately he cannot escape us, whatever he may do."

"Then you are mistaken," the Jaguar replied, stamping his foot passionately; "whether he live or die the money is lost to us."

"How so?"

The Jaguar told his confidant in a few words what had passed between him and the captain.

"Confusion!" the American exclaimed; "in that case let us make haste."

"To increase our misfortunes, it is as dark as in an oven."

"By heavens! let us make an illumination. Perhaps it will cause those demons incarnate to reflect."

"You are right. Torches here!"

"Better still. Let us fire the forest."

"Ah, ah," the Jaguar said, with a laugh, "bravo! Let us smoke them out like mnsk-rats."

This diabolical idea was immediately carried out, and ere long a belt of flame ran all around the gorge.

They had not long to wait; a sharp fusillade began, mingled with the cries and yells of the assailants.

"It is time!" the captain shouted.

The sound of a chest falling down the precipice was immediately heard.

Owing to the fire, it was as bright as day, and not a movement of the Mexicans escaped their adversaries.

The latter uttered a yell of fury on seeing the chests disappear one after the other in the abyss.

They rushed at the soldiers; but the latter received them at the bayonet's point.

A point-blank discharge from the Mexicans, who had reserved their fire, laid many of the enemy low, and spread disorder through the ranks of the assailants, who began falling back involuntarily.

"Forward!" the Jaguar howled.

The bandits returned to the charge still eagerly.

"Keep firm, we must die," the captain said.

"We will," the soldiers repeated unanimously.

The fight then began, body to body, foot to foot, chest against chest; the assailants and assailed were mixed up and fought more like wild beasts than men.

The arrieros, though decimated by the bullets fired at them, did not the less eagerly continue their task; the crowbar scarce fell from the hand of one shot down, ere another seized the heavy iron mass, and the chests of money toppled uninteruptedly over the precipice, in spite of the yells of fury, and gigantic efforts of the enemy, who exhausted themselves in vain to breach the human wall that barred their passage.

'Twas a fearfully grand sight, this obstinate struggle, this implacable combat which these men carried on, by the brilliant light of a burning forest.

The cries now ceased, the butchery went on silently and terribly, and at times the captain could be heard sharply repeating—

"Close up there, close up!"

And the ranks closed, and the men fell without a murmur, having already sacrificed their lives, and fighting to gain the few moments indispensable to prevent their sacrifice being sterile.

In vain did the Border Rifles, excited by the desire of gain, try to crush this energetic resistance offered them by a handful of men; the heroic soldiers, supporting one another, with their feet pressed against the corpses of those who had preceded them to death, seemed to multiply themselves in order to bar the gorge.

The fight, however, could not possibly last much longer; ten men only were left of the captain's detachment; the others had fallen.

All the arrieros were dead, two chests still remained on the edge of the precipice; the captain looked hurriedly around.

"One more effort, lads!" he shouted, "we only want five minutes to finish our task."

"*¡Dios y libertad!*" the soldiers shouted; and, although exhausted with fatigue, they threw themselves resolutely into the thickest part of the crowd.

For a few minutes, these men accomplished prodigies; but at length numbers gained the mastery: they all fell! The captain alone was alive.

He had taken advantage of the devotion of his soldiers to seize a crowbar, and hurl one chest over the precipice; the second, raised with great difficulty, only required a final effort to disappear in its turn, when suddenly a terrible hurrah caused the officer to raise his head.

The Border Rifles were rushing up, terrible, and panting like tigers thirsting for carnage.

"Ah!" Gregorio Felpa, the traitor-guide, shouted; "at any rate we shall have this one."

"You lie, villain!" the captain answered.

And raising the terrible bar of iron, he cleft the skull of the soldier, who fell like a stunned ox.

"Whose turn is it next?" the captain said as he raised the crowbar.

A yell of horror burst from the crowd, which hesitated for a moment.

The captain quickly lowered his crowbar, and the chest hung over the brink of the abyss.

This movement restored the borderers all their rage and fury.

"Down with him, down with him!" they shouted, as they rushed on the officer.

"Halt!" the Jaguar said as he bounded forward, and overthrew all in his way; "not one of you must stir; this man belongs to me."

On hearing this well-known voice, all the men stopped.

The captain threw away his crowbar, for the last chest had fallen in its turn over the precipice.

"Surrender, Captain Melendez," the Jaguar said.

The latter had taken up his sabre again.

"It is not worth while now," he replied, "I prefer to die."

"Defend yourself then."

The two men crossed swords, and for some minutes a furious clashing of steel could be heard. All at once, the captain, by a sharp movement, made his adversary's weapon fly ten paces off, and ere the latter recovered from his surprise, the officer rushed on him and writhed round him like a serpent.

The two men rolled on the ground.

Two yards behind them was the precipice.

All the captain's efforts were intended to drag the Jaguar to the verge of the abyss.

The latter, on the contrary, strove to free himself from his opponent's terrible grasp, for he had doubtless guessed his desperate resolve.

At last, after a struggle of some minutes, the arms that held the Jaguar round the body gradually loosed their hold, the officer's clenched hands opened, and the young man, by the outlay of his whole strength, succeeded in throwing off his enemy and rising.

But he was hardly on his feet, ere the captain, who appeared exhausted and almost fainting, bounded like a tiger, seized his adversary round the body, and gave him a fearful shock.

The Jaguar, still confused by the struggle he had gone through, and not suspecting this sudden attack, tottered, and lost his balance with a loud cry.

"At length!" the captain shouted with ferocious joy.

The borderers uttered an exclamation of horror and despair.

The two enemies had disappeared in the abyss.

[What became of them will be found fully recorded in the next volume of this series, called "THE FREEBOOTERS."]

THE END.

THE FREEBOOTERS

A Story

BY

GUSTAVE AIMARD

AUTHOR OF "TRAPPERS OF ARKANSAS," "BORDER RIFLES," "WHITE SCALPER," ETC.

REVISED AND EDITED BY PERCY B. ST. JOHN

LONDON

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AND

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NOTICE.

GUSTAVE AIMARD was the adopted son of one of the most powerful Indian tribes, with whom he lived for more than fifteen years in the heart of the Prairies, sharing their dangers and their combats, and accompanying them everywhere, rifle in one hand and tomahawk in the other. In turn squatter, hunter, trapper, warrior, and miner, **GUSTAVE AIMARD** has traversed America from the highest peaks of the Cordilleras to the ocean shores, living from hand to mouth, happy for the day, careless of the morrow. Hence it is that **GUSTAVE AIMARD** only describes his own life. The Indians of whom he speaks he has known—the manners he depicts are his own.

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THE FREEBOOTERS

CHAPTER I.

FRAY ANTONIO.

FRAY ANTONIO was no coward ; far from it : in several critical circumstances he had displayed true bravery ; but he was a man to whom the existence he led offered enormous advantages and incalculable delights. Life seemed to him good, and he did all in his power to spend it jolly and free from care. Hence, through respect for himself, he was extremely prudent, only facing danger when it was absolutely necessary ; but at such times, like all men driven into a corner, he became terrible and really dangerous to those who, in one way or the other, had provoked in him this explosion of passion.

It is more than probable that Fray Antonio made none of these reflections while he stepped silently and quietly through the trees, leaving the man who had helped him, and probably saved his life, to struggle as he could with the crowd of red-skins.

In Mexico, as the clergy are recruited from the poorest class of the population, their ranks contain certain men of gross ignorance, and for the most part of doubtful morality.

Fray Antonio was assuredly no better or worse than the other monks whose gown he wore ; but, unluckily for him, for some time past fatality appeared to have vented its spite on him.

The atrocious mystification of which John Davis had rendered the poor monk a victim had especially spread a gloomy haze over his hitherto so gay mind ; a sad despondency had seized upon him ; and it was with a heavy and uncertain step that he fled through the forest.

Night surprised poor Fray Antonio ere he had reached the skirt of this forest, which seemed to him interminable. Unarmed, without means of lighting a fire, half-dead with hunger and alarm, the monk glanced around in utter despair, and fell to the ground, giving vent to a dull groan.

Still, after a few moments, the instinct of self-preservation gained the mastery, and the monk, whose teeth chattered with terror on hearing through the forest the lugubrious roaring of the wild beasts, which were beginning to awaken, and greeted in their fashion the longed-for return of gloom—rose with a feverish energy, and suffering from that feverish over-excitement which fear raised to a

certain pitch produces, resolved to profit by the fugitive rays that still crossed the glade, to secure himself a shelter for the night.

Opposite him was a majestic live oak, whose interlaced branches and dense foliage seemed to offer him a secure retreat against the probable attack of the gloomy denizens of the forest.

Assuredly, under any other circumstances than those in which he found himself, the bare idea of clambering up this immense tree would have appeared to the monk the height of folly and mental aberration, owing to his paunch and awkwardness.

But it was a critical moment: at each instant the situation grew more dangerous; the howling came nearer; there was no time to hesitate. After walking once or twice round the tree in order to discover the spot which offered the greatest facility for his ascent, he gave vent to a sigh, embraced the enormous and rugged trunk with his arms and knees, and painfully commenced his attempt.

But it was no easy matter, especially for a plump monk, to mount the tree, and Fray Antonio soon perceived this fact at his own expense; for each time that he managed to raise himself a few inches from the ground, his strength suddenly failed him, and he fell back on the ground with lacerated hands and torn clothes.

Ten times already he had renewed his efforts, with the desperation produced by despair, without seeing them crowned with success; the perspiration poured down his face; his chest heaved; he was in a state to produce pity even in his most bitter enemy.

"I shall never succeed in getting up this," he muttered sadly; "and if I remain here, I am a lost man, for in less than an hour I shall be infallibly devoured by some tiger in search of its supper."

This final reflection, which was incontestably true, restored new ardour to the monk, who resolved to make a new and final attempt. But this time he wished to take every precaution; consequently, he began collecting the dead wood round him and piling it at the foot of the tree, so as to form a scaffolding high enough for him to reach, without any great difficulty, a low branch, where, being careful to remain awake, he might hope to spend the night without fear of being devoured—an alternative for which the worthy monk did not feel the slightest inclination.

Soon, thanks to the rapidity of his movements, Fray Antonio had a considerable heap of wood. A smile of satisfaction lit up his wide face, and he breathed again as he wiped away the perspiration from his face.

"This time," he muttered, "if I do not succeed, I shall be clumsy."

In the meanwhile the last gleams of twilight had entirely disappeared; the absence of the stars, which had not yet appeared, left a profound obscurity in the sky; all was beginning to be blotted out, only allowing here and there a few clumps of trees to be distinguished, as they outlined their gloomy masses in the night, or a few patches of water, the result of the last storm, which studded the forest with paler spots. The evening breeze had risen, and could be heard sighing through the foliage with a sad and melancholy plaintiveness.

The dangerous denizens of the forest had quitted their lurking-places, and crushed the dead wood, as they eagerly came on, amid a deafening current of cat-like howls. The monk had not an instant to lose.

After taking a searching glance around him, the monk devotedly crossed himself, recommended himself to Heaven with a sincerity he had probably never evinced before, and then, suddenly making up his mind, began resolutely climbing to the top of this fictitious mount.

He then stopped for a minute to draw breath; Fray Antonio was now nearly ten feet from the ground. It is true that any animal could easily have overthrown this obstacle; but this beginning of success revived the monk's courage, the more so because, on raising his eyes he saw, a few paces above him, the blessed branch toward which he had so long extended his arms in vain.

He embraced the tree once more, and recommenced his clambering. Fray Antonio at length managed to seize the branch with both hands, and clung to it with all his strength. The rest was as nothing. The monk collected all the vigour his previous attempts had left him, and raising himself by his arms, tried to get astride on the branch. Already he had raised his head and shoulders above the branch, when he felt a hand or a claw clutch his right leg, and squeeze it as in a vice. A shudder of terror ran over the monk's body: his blood stood still in his veins; an icy perspiration beaded on his temples, and his teeth chattered.

"Mercy!" he exclaimed in a choking voice, "I am dead. Holy Virgin, have pity on me."

His strength, paralysed by terror, deserted him, his hands let loose the protecting branch, and he fell, like a log, at the foot of the tree. Fortunately for Fray Antonio, the care he had taken in piling up the dead wood to a considerable extent broke his fall, otherwise it would probably have been mortal: but the shock he experienced was so great that he completely lost his senses. The monk's fainting fit was long: when he returned to life and opened his eyes again, he took a frightened glance around, and fancied he must be suffering from a horrible nightmare.

He still found himself by the tree, which he had tried so long to climb, but he was lying close to an enormous fire, over which half a deer was roasting, and around him were some twenty Indians, crouching on their heels, silently smoking their pipes, while their horses, picketed a few yards off, and ready to mount, were eating their provender.

These new friends were clothed in their war-garb, and from their hair drawn off their foreheads, and their long barbed lances, it was easy to recognise them as Apaches.

The monk's blood ran cold, for the Apaches are notorious for their cruelty. Poor Fray Antonio had fallen from Charybdis into Scylla; he had only escaped from the jaws of the wild beasts in order to be in all probability martyred by the red-skins. It was a sad prospect which furnished the unlucky monk with ample material for thoughts, each more gloomy than the other, for he had often listened with a shudder to the hunters' stories about the atrocious tortures the Apaches take a delight in inflicting on their prisoners with unexampled barbarity.

Still, the Indians went on smoking silently, and did not appear to perceive that their captive had regained his senses. For his part, the monk kept his eyes closed.

At length the Indians left off smoking, and after shaking the ash out of their calumets, passed them again through their girdle; a red-skin removed from the fire the half deer, which was perfectly roasted, laid it in abanijo leaves in front of his comrades, and each man drawing his scalping-knife, prepared for a vigorous attack on the venison, which exhaled an appetising odour, especially for the nostrils of a man who, during the whole past day, had been condemned to an absolute fast.

At this moment the monk felt a heavy hand laid on his chest, while a voice said—

"The father of prayer can open his eyes now, for the venison is smoking, and his share is cut off."

The monk, perceiving that his stratagem was discovered, and excited by the smell of the meat, having made up his mind, opened his eyes, and sat up.

"Och!" the man said, "my father can eat; he must be hungry, and has slept enough."

The monk attempted to smile, but only made a frightful grimace. As, however, he was as hungry as a wolf, he followed the example offered him by the Indians, who had already commenced their meal, and set to work eating the lump of venison which they had the politeness to set before him. The meal did not take long; still it lasted long enough to restore a little courage to the monk, and make him regard his position from a less gloomy side.

The behaviour of the Apaches was anything but hostile; on the contrary, they were most attentive, giving him more food so soon as they perceived that he had nothing before him: they had even carried their politeness so far as to give him a few mouthfuls of spirit, an extremely precious liquid, of which they are most greedy.

When he had ended his meal, the monk, who was almost fully reassured as to the amicable temper of his new friends, on seeing them light their pipes, took from his pocket tobacco and an Indian corn leaf, and after rolling a *pajillo* with the skill which the men of Spanish race possess, he conscientiously enjoyed his smoke.

A considerable space of time elapsed, and not a syllable was exchanged. By degrees the ranks of the red-skins thinned: one after the other, at short intervals, rolled themselves in their blankets, lay down with their feet to the fire, and went to sleep. Fray Antonio, crushed by the emotions of the day, and the fatigue he had experienced, would gladly have imitated the Indians, had he dared, for he felt his eyes close involuntarily. At last the Indian who hitherto had alone spoken, perceiving his state of somnolency, took pity on him. He rose, fetched a horsecloth, and brought it to the monk.

"My father will wrap himself in this fressada," he said; "the nights are cold and my father needs sleep greatly, he will, therefore, feel warmed with this To-morrow Blue-fox will smoke the calumet with the father of prayer."

Fray Antonio gratefully accepted the horsecloth, wrapped himself up carefully, and lay down by the fire so as to absorb the largest amount of caloric possible. Still the Indian's words did not fail to cause him some degree of anxiety.

"Hum!" he muttered, "that is the reverse of the medal. What can this pagan have to say to me? he does not mean to ask me to christen him, I suppose? especially as his name appears to be Blue-fox—a nice savage name, that Well, heaven will not abandon me, and it will be day to-morrow. So now for a snooze."

And with this reflection the monk closed his eyes: two minutes later he slept as if never going to wake again.

Blue-fox remained crouched over the fire the whole night, plunged in gloomy thought, and watching, alone of his comrades, over the common safety.

At sun-rise Blue-fox was still awake: he had remained the whole night without sleep.

CHAPTER II.

INDIAN DIPLOMACY.

THE night passed calm and peaceful. As soon as the sun appeared on the horizon, saluted by the deafening concert of the birds hidden beneath the foliage, Blue-fox, who had hitherto remained motionless, extended his right arm in the direction of the monk, who was lying by his side, and gently touched him with his hand. This touch, slight as it was, sufficed, however, to arouse Fray Antonio.

"Has my brother slept well?" the Indian asked in his hoarse voice; "the Wacondah loves him, has watched over his sleep, and kept Nyang, the genius of evil, away from his dreams."

"I have indeed slept well, chief, and I thank you for your cordial hospitality."

A smile played round the Indian's lips, as he continued—

"My father is one of the chiefs of prayer of his nation, the God of the pale-faces is powerful, He protects those who devote themselves to His service."

As this remark required no answer, the monk contented himself by bowing. Still, his anxiety increased; beneath the chief's gentle words he fancied he could hear the hoarse voice of the tiger, which licks its lips ere devouring the booty it holds gasping in its terrible claws.

Fray Antonio had not even the resource of pretending not to understand the speaker, for the chief expressed himself in Spanish, a language all the Indian tribes understand.

The morning was magnificent; the trees, with their dew-laden leaves, seemed greener than usual; a slight mist, impregnated with the soft matutinal odours, rose from the ground, and was sucked up by the sunbeams, which with each moment grew warmer. The whole camp was still sunk in sleep; the chief and the monk were alone awake. After a moment's silence, Blue-fox continued—

"My father will listen," he said; "a chief is about to speak; Blue-fox is a sachem, his tongue is not forked."

"I am listening," Fray Antonio replied.

"Blue-fox is not an Apache, although he wears their costumes, and leads one of their most powerful tribes on the war-trail; Blue-fox is a Snake Pawnee. Many moons ago Blue-fox left the hunting-grounds of his nation, never to return to them, and became an adopted son of the Apaches; why did Blue-fox act thus?"

The chief paused. The monk was on the point of answering that he did not know the fact, and did not want to, but a moment's reflection made him understand the danger of such an answer.

"The brothers of the chief were ungrateful to him," he replied, "and the sachem left them, after shaking off his mocassins at the entrance of their village."

The chief shook his head in negation.

"No," he answered, "the brothers of Blue-fox loved him, they still weep for his absence; but the chief was sad, a friend had left him, and took away his heart."

"Ah!" said the monk, not at all understanding.

"Yes," the Indian continued; "Blue-fox could not endure the absence of his friend, and left his brothers to go in search of him."

"Of course you have found the person again?"

"For a long time Blue-fox sought in vain ; but one day he at length saw him again."

"Good, and now you are re-united ?"

"My father does not understand," the Indian answered drily.

This was perfectly correct. The monk did not understand a syllable ; but the peremptory accent with which Blue-fox uttered the last sentence aroused him, and while recalling him to a feeling of his present position, made him comprehend the danger of not seeming to take an interest in the conversation.

"Pardon me, chief," he eagerly answered ; "on the contrary, I perfectly understand ; but I am subject to a certain absence of mind completely independent of my will, which I assure you is no fault of mine."

"Good, my father is like all the chiefs of prayer of the pale-faces, his thoughts are constantly directed to the Wacondah."

"So it is, chief," the monk exclaimed ; "continue your narrative, I beg."

"Wah ! my father constantly traverses the prairies of the pale-faces ; and my father knows the pale hunters of these prairies ?"

"Nearly all."

"Very good ; one of these hunters is the friend so deeply regretted by Blue-fox," the Indian continued. "Very often the red-skin warrior has been led a short distance from his friend by the incidents of the chase, but never near enough to make himself known."

"That is unfortunate."

"The chief would like to see his friend, and smoke the calumet of peace with him, while conversing about old times, and the period when they traversed together the hunting-grounds of the sachem's terrible nation."

"Then the hunter is an Indian ?"

"No, he is a pale-face ; but if his skin is white, the Great Spirit has placed an Indian heart in his bosom."

"But why does not the chief frankly go and join his friend, if he know where he is ?"

At this insinuation, which he was far from anticipating, the chief frowned, and a cloud momentarily crossed his face.

"Blue-fox does not go to meet his friend, because the latter is not alone."

"That is different, and I can understand your prudence."

"Good," the Indian added ; "wisdom speaks by the mouth of my father ; he is certainly a chief of prayer, and his lips distil the purest honey."

Fray Antonio drew himself up, and his alarm was beginning to be dissipated ; he saw vaguely that the red-skin wished to ask something of him. This thought restored his courage.

"What my brother is unable to do, I can undertake," he said, in an insinuating voice.

The Apache gave him a piercing glance.

"Wah !" he replied ; "then my father knows where to find the chief's friend ?"

"How should I know it ?" the monk objected ; "you have not told me his name yet."

"That is true ; my father is good, he will forgive me. So he does not yet know who the pale-face is ?"

"I know him, perhaps, but up to the present I am ignorant whom the chief alludes to."

"Blue-fox is rich ; he has numerous horses ; he can assemble round his totem one hundred warriors, and ten times twenty times more. If my father is willing to serve the sachem, he will find him grateful."

"I ask nothing better than to be agreeable to you, chief, if it lies in my power; but you must explain clearly what I have to do."

"Good; the sachem will explain everything. My father will listen. Among all the pale hunters, whose mocassins trample the prairie grass in all directions, there is one who is braver and more terrible than the rest; the tigers and jaguars fly at his approach, and the Indian warriors themselves are afraid to cope with him. This hunter is no effeminate Yori; the blood of the Gachupinos does not flow in his veins; he is the son of a colder land, and his ancestors fought for a lengthened period with the Long Knives of the East."

"Good," the monk said; "from what the chief tells me, I see that this man is a Canadian."

"That is the name given, I think, to his nation."

"But among all the hunters I am acquainted with, there is only one who is a Canadian."

"Wah!" said the chief, "only one?"

"Yes; his name is Tranquil, I think, and he is attached to the Larch-tree hacienda."

"Wah! that is the very man. Does my father know him?"

"Not much, I confess, but still sufficiently to present myself to him."

"Very good."

"Still, I warn you, chief, that this man, like all his fellows, leads an extremely vagabond life, being here to-day and gone to-morrow."

"My father need not trouble himself; the sachem will lead him to the camp of the Tiger-killer."

"Very good; I will answer for the rest."

"My father must carefully retain in his heart the words of Blue-fox. The warriors are awaking; they must know nothing."

The conversation broke off here. The warriors were really awaking, and the camp, so quiet a few moments previously, had now the aspect of a hive, when the bees prepare at sunrise to go in search of their daily crop. At a sign from the chief, the hachesto, or public crier, mounted a fallen tree, and twice uttered a shrill cry. At this appeal all the warriors, even those still lying on the ground, hastened to range themselves behind the chief. A deep silence then prevailed for several minutes; all the Indians, with their arms folded on their chest, and their faces turned to the rising sun, awaited what the sachem was about to do.

The latter took a calabash full of water, which the hachesto handed him, and in which was a spray of wormwood. Then raising his voice, he sprinkled toward the four cardinal points, saying—

"Wacondah, Wacondah! thou unknown and omnipotent Spirit, whose universe is the temple, Master of the life of man, protect thy children!"

"Master of the life of man, protect thy children!" the Apaches repeated in chorus, respectfully bowing.

"Creator of the great sacred tortoise, whose skill supports the world, keep far from us Nyang, the genius of evil! deliver our enemies to us, and give us their scalps. Wacondah! Wacondah! protect thy children!"

"Wacondah! Wacondah! protect thy children!" the warriors repeated.

The sachem then bowed to the sun.

"And thou, sublime star, visible representative of the omnipotent and invincible Creator, continue to pour thy vivifying heat on the hunting-grounds of thy red sons, and intercede for them with the Master of life. May this clear water I offer thee be grateful. Wacondah! Wacondah! protect thy children!"

"Wacondah! Wacondah! protect thy children!" the Apaches repeated, and

followed their chief's example by kneeling. The latter then took a medicine-rod, and waved it several times over his head.

"Nyang, spirit of evil, rebel against the Master of Life, we brave and despise thy power, for the Wacondah protects us!"

All the congregation uttered a loud yell, and rose. When the morning prayer had been said, and the rites performed, each man began attending to his daily duties.

Fray Antonio had witnessed with extreme astonishment this sacred and affecting ceremony, whose details, however, escaped his notice, for the words uttered by the chief had been in the dialect of his nation, and consequently incomprehensible to the monk. He experienced a certain delight on seeing that these men, whom he regarded as barbarians, were not entirely so.

The expiring camp-fires were now rekindled, in order to prepare the morning meal, while scouts started in every direction to assure themselves that the road was free. The monk, being now completely reassured, ate with good appetite the provisions offered him, and made no objection to mount the horse the chief indicated to him, when they set out on the termination of the meal.

They rode for several hours along tracks marked by wild beasts, forced, through the narrowness of the paths, to go in Indian file, and although the monk perceived that the sachem constantly kept by his side, he did not feel at all alarmed.

A little before mid-day they halted on the bank of a small stream, shadowed by lofty trees, where they intended to wait till the great heat had passed. The monk was not at all vexed at this delay, which enabled him to rest in the cool. During the halt Blue-fox did not once address him, and the monk made no attempt to bring on a conversation.

At about four p.m. the band re-mounted, and set out again; but this time, instead of going at a walking pace, they galloped. The ride was long; the sun had set for more than two hours, and still the Indians galloped. At length, at a signal from their chief, they halted. Blue-fox then went up to the monk, and drew him aside.

"We must separate here," he said; "it would not be prudent for the Apaches to go further: my father will continue his journey alone."

"I?" the monk said, in surprise; "you are jesting, chief—I prefer remaining with you."

"That cannot be," the Indian said.

"Where the deuce would you have me go at this hour, and in this darkness?"

"My father will look," the chief continued, stretching out his arm to the south-west; "does he see that reddish light scarce rising above the horizon?"

Fray Antonio looked attentively in the direction indicated. "Yes," he said, presently, "I do see it."

"Very good; that flame is produced by a camp-fire of the pale-faces."

"Oh, oh! are you sure of that?"

"Yes; but my father must listen; the pale-faces will receive my father kindly."

"I understand; then I will tell Tranquil that his friend Blue-fox desires to speak with him."

"The magpie is a chattering and brainless bird, which gabbles like an old squaw," the chief roughly interrupted him; "my father will say nothing."

"Oh!" the monk said, in confusion.

"My father will be careful to do what I order him, if he does not wish his scalp to dry on a lance."

Fray Antonio shuddered at this menace.

"I swear it, chief," he said.

"A man does not swear," the chief remarked; "he says yes or no. When my father reaches the camp of the pale-faces he will not allude to the Apaches; but when the pale hunters are asleep, my father will leave the camp and come to Blue-fox."

"But where shall I find you?" the monk asked.

"My father need not trouble himself about that, for I shall manage to find him."

"Very good."

"If my father is faithful, Blue-fox will give him a buffalo-skin full of gold dust; if not, he must not hope to escape the chief; the Apaches are crafty, the scalp of a chief of prayer will adorn the lance of a chief."

"Good-bye, then," replied the monk.

"Till we meet again," the Apache said, with a grin.

Fray Antonio made no reply, but uttered a deep sigh, and pushed on in the direction of the camp. The nearer he drew to it, the more difficult did it appear to him to accomplish the sinister mission with which the Apache chief had intrusted him; twice or thrice the idea of flight crossed his mind, but whither?

At length the camp appeared before the monk's startled eyes; as he could not draw back, for the hunters had doubtless perceived him already, he decided on pushing forward, while desperately muttering—

"The Lord have mercy upon me!"

CHAPTER III.

DOWN THE PRECIPICE.

WE have several times visited the narrow defile where the Border Rifles and the Mexicans fought the action we described in a previous volume. Bending over the precipice, with our eyes fixed on the yawning abyss, we heard the narrative of the strange incidents of that battle of giants, and if we had not been certain of the veracity of the narrator, we should certainly have not only doubted, but completely denied the possibility of certain facts which are, however, rigorously true, and which we are now about to impart to the reader.

The Border Rifles saw with a shriek of horror the two men, intertwined like serpents, roll together over the precipice; the flashes of the fire, which was beginning to die out for want of nourishment, after devastating the crests of the hills, threw at intervals a lurid light over this scene, and gave it a striking aspect.

The first moment of stupor past, John Davis, mastering with difficulty the emotion that agitated him, sought to restore courage, if not hope, to all these men who were crushed by the terrible catastrophe. John Davis enjoyed, and justly so, a great reputation among the borderers. All knew the close friendship which attached the Americans to their chief: in several serious affairs he had displayed a coolness and intelligence which gained him the respect and admiration of these men: hence they immediately responded to his appeal, by grouping silently round him, for they understood intuitively that there was only one man among them worthy of succeeding the Jaguar, and that he was the North American.

John Davis had guessed the feelings that agitated them, but did not allow it

to be seen : his face was pale, his appearance sad : he bent a thoughtful glance on the rude, determined men who, leaning on their rifles, gazed at him mournfully, and seemed already tacitly to recognise the authority with which he was, probably, about to invest himself.

Their expectations were deceived, at least, temporarily. Davis, at this moment, had no intention of making the borderers elect him as their chief : the fate of his friend entirely absorbed him.

"Friends," he said, in a melancholy tone, "a terrible misfortune has struck us. Under such circumstances, we must summon up all our courage and resignation, for women weep, but men revenge themselves. The death of the Jaguar is not only an immense loss to ourselves, but also for the cause we have sworn to defend, and to which he has already given such great proof of devotion. But, before bemoaning our chief, so worthy in every respect of the sorrow which we shall feel for him, we have one duty to accomplish—a duty which, if we neglect it, will cause us piercing remorse."

"Speak, speak, John Davis; we are ready to do anything you order us," the borderers exclaimed.

"I thank you," the American continued, "for the enthusiasm with which you have replied to me : I cannot believe that an intellect so vast, a heart so noble, as that of our beloved chief can be thus destroyed. Heaven will have performed a miracle in favour of our chief, and we shall see him reappear among us safe and sound ! But whatsoever may happen, should this last hope be denied us, at any rate we must not abandon like cowards, without attempting to save him, the man who twenty times braved death for each of us. For my part, I swear by all that is most sacred in the world, that I will not leave this spot till I have assured myself whether the Jaguar be dead or alive."

At these words a buzz of assent ran along his hearers, and John Davis continued, "Who knows whether our unhappy chief is not lying crushed, but still breathing, at the foot of this accursed abyss, and reproaching us for our cowardly desertion of him ?"

The Border Rifles declared, with one accord, that they would find their chief again, dead or alive.

"Good, my friends," the American exclaimed ; "if he be unhappily dead, we will bury him and protect his remains, so dear to us on many accounts, from the insults of wild beasts : but, I repeat to you, a presentiment tells me that he is still alive."

"May Heaven hear you, John Davis," the borderers shouted, "and restore us our chief."

"I am going to descend the precipice," the American said ; "I will inspect its most secret recesses, and before sunrise we shall know what we have to hope or fear."

This proposal of John Davis was greeted as it deserved, by enthusiastic shouts.

"Permit me a remark," said an old wood-ranger.

"Speak, Ruperto, what is it ?" Davis answered.

"I have known this spot for a long time."

"Come to facts, my friend."

"You can act as you please, John Davis, on the information I am about to give you ; by turning to the right, after marching for about three miles, you get round the hills, and what appears to us from here a precipice, is, in fact, only a plain, very narrow, I allow, but easy to traverse on horseback."

"Ah, ah," John said thoughtfully, "and what do you conclude from that, Ruperto ?"

"That it would be, perhaps, better to mount and skirt the hills."

"Yes, yes, that is a good idea, and we will take advantage of it; take twenty men with you, Ruperto, and proceed at full speed to the plain you allude to, for we must not throw away any chance; the rest of the band will remain here to watch the environs, while I effect the descent of the barranca."

"You still adhere to your idea, then?"

"More than ever!"

"As you please, John Davis, as you please, though you risk your bones on such a black night as this."

"I trust in Heaven, and I hope it will protect me."

"I hope so too, for your sake."

Red Ruperto then went off, followed by twenty borderers, and soon disappeared in the darkness. The descent John Davis was about to make was anything but easy. The American was too experienced a wood-ranger not to know this, and hence took all proper precautions. He placed in his belt his knife and a wide and strong axe, and fastened round his waist a rope formed of several *reatas*. Three men seized the end of the rope, which they turned round the stem of a tree, so as to let it out gently whenever the American desired it. As a final precaution, he lit a branch of ocote wood, which was to serve as a torch during his perilous descent, for the sky was so perfectly black, it was impossible to see anything two paces away. His last measures taken, with the coolness that distinguishes men of his race, the North American pressed the hands held out to him, tried once again to restore hope to his comrades by a few hearty words, and kneeling on the brink of the abyss, began slowly descending. John Davis was a man of tried courage, his life had been one continued struggle, in which he had only triumphed through his strength of will and energy; still, when he was being lowered into the barranca, he felt chilled to the heart, and could not repress a slight start of terror, which ran over all his limbs like an electric flash.

Although he was fastened round the waist, it was no easy task to go down this almost perpendicular wall, to which he was compelled to cling like a reptile, clutching at every tuft of grass or shrub he came across, or else he had been carried away by the wind, which blew furiously.

The first minutes were the most terrible; the feet and hands must grow accustomed to the rude task imposed on them, and they only gradually learn to find, as it were instinctively, their resting-places.

John Davis had hardly gone ten yards down, ere he found himself on a wide ledge covered with thick shrubs. Lighting himself by the torch, the American carefully examined this species of esplanade, which was about a dozen paces in circumference, and perceived that the tops of the thick shrubs which covered it had been broken as if they had received a tremendous blow.

Davis looked around him. He soon concluded that this enormous gap could only have been made by the fall of heavy bodies; this remark gave him hope, for at so slight a distance from the mouth of the abyss, the two enemies must have been full of life; the rapidity of their fall must have naturally been arrested by the shrubs; they might have met at various distances similar obstacles, and consequently have undergone several comparatively harmless falls.

John Davis continued his descent; the slope became constantly less abrupt, and the adventurer met, not only shrubs, but clumps of trees, grouped here and there. Still, as John Davis found no further traces, a fear fell upon him, and painfully contracted his heart; he was afraid, lest the shrubs, through their elasticity, might have hurled the two unhappy men into space, instead of

letting them follow the slope of the precipice. This thought so powerfully occupied the American's mind, that a deep discouragement seized upon him, and for some moments he remained without strength or will, crouching sadly on the ground.

But Davis was a man of too energetic a character to give way for any length of time to despair: he soon raised his head, and looked boldly around him.

"I must go on," he said in a firm voice. But, at the same moment, he suddenly gave a start of surprise, and, uttering a loud cry, rushed quickly toward a black mass, to which he had hitherto paid but slight attention.

The white-headed eagle, the most powerful and cleverest of birds, ordinarily builds its nest on the sides of barrancas, at the top of the loftiest trees, and chiefly those denuded of branches to a considerable height. This nest, strongly built, is composed of sticks from three to five feet long, fastened together and covered with Spanish beard, a species of cryptogamic plant of the lichen family, wild grass, and large patches of turf. When the nest is completed, it measures from six to seven feet in diameter, and at times the accumulation of materials is so considerable—for the same nest is frequently occupied for a number of years, and receives augmentations each season—that its depth equals its diameter. As the nest of the white-headed eagle is very heavy, it is generally placed in the centre of a fork formed by the fortuitous meeting of several large branches.

John Davis, by the help of his torch, had just discovered a few yards from him, and almost on a level with the spot where he was standing, an eagle's nest, built on the top of an immense tree, whose trunk descended for a considerable depth in the precipice.

Two bodies were lying stretched across this nest, and the American only required one glance to assure himself that they were those of the Jaguar and the Mexican captain still fast locked in each other's arms.

It was not an easy undertaking to reach this nest, which was nearly ten yards from the edge of the precipice; but John Davis, now that he had found the body of his chief, was determined to learn, at all risks, whether he were alive or dead. But what means was he to employ to acquire this certainty? how reach the tree, which oscillated violently with every gust? After some thought, the American recognised the fact that he could never climb the tree alone; he therefore placed his hands funnel-wise to his mouth, and gave the shout agreed on. After half an hour of unheard-of fatigue, Davis found himself again among his comrades.

The Border Rifles crowded round eagerly to learn the details of his expedition, which he hastened to give them, and which were received with shouts of joy by all. Then happened a thing which proves how great was the affection all these men bore their chief; without exchanging a word, all procured torches, and, as if obeying the same impulse, began descending the abyss.

Thanks to the multiplicity of torches, which spread abroad sufficient light, and, before all, thanks to the skill of these men, accustomed since childhood to run about the forests, and clamber up rocks and precipices in sport, this descent was effected without any further misfortunes, and the whole band was soon assembled at the spot whence the American had first discovered the nest of the white-headed eagle.

All was in the same state as Davis left it: the two bodies were still motionless, and still intertwined. Were they dead, or had they fainted? Such was the question all asked themselves, and no one could answer. All at once a loud noise was heard, and the bottom of the barranca was illumined by a number of torches. Ruperto's party had reached the spot. Guided by the flashes they

saw running along the sides of the precipice, they soon discovered the nest.

The arrival of Ruperto and his comrades was a great comfort, for now nothing would be more easy than to reach the nest. Four powerful men, armed with axes, glided along the side of the precipice to the foot of the tree, which they began felling with hurried strokes, while John Davis and his men threw their reatas round the top branches of the tree, and gradually drew it towards them. It began gracefully bending, and at length lay on the side of the barranca, without receiving any very serious shock.

John Davis immediately entered the nest, and drawing his knife from his belt, bent over the body of the Jaguar, and put the blade to his lips. There was a moment of profound anxiety for these men; their silence was so complete, that the beating of their hearts might be heard. They stood with their eyes fixed on the American, daring scarcely to breathe, and, as it were, hanging on his lips. At length John rose, and placed the knife near a torch; the blade was slightly tarnished.

"He lives, brothers, he lives!" he shouted.

The Border Rifles at once broke out into such a howl of joy, that the night-birds, startled in their gloomy hiding-places, rose on all sides, and began flying backwards and forwards, uttering discordant and deafening cries. But this was not all: the next point was to get the Jaguar out of the precipice, and let him down into the gorge. We have said that the two bodies were intertwined. The adventurers felt but little sympathy for Captain Melendez, the primary cause of the catastrophe which had so nearly proved fatal to the Jaguar; hence they were not at all eager to assure themselves whether he were dead or alive; and when the moment arrived to find means for conveying the body of their chief into the barranca, a very serious and stormy discussion arose as to the Mexican officer. The majority of the adventurers were of opinion that the easiest way of separating the two bodies was by cutting off the captain's arms, and throwing his body into the abyss, to serve as food for wild beasts. Those who were more excited talked about stabbing him at once, so as to make quite sure he did not recover. Some even had seized their knives to carry out this resolution.

"Stop!" shouted John Davis, "the Jaguar lives; he is still your chief, so leave him to treat this man as he thinks proper. Who knows whether the life of this officer may not be more valuable to us than his death?"

The adventurers were not easily induced to spare the captain. Still, owing to the influence he enjoyed with the band, Davis succeeded in making them listen to reason.

CHAPTER IV.

TWO ENEMIES.

THE hesitation of the Border Rifles was brief: for these half-savage men, an obstacle to be overcome was only a stimulus. The two wounded men, securely fastened on cross-pieces of wood by reatas, were let down one after the other to the bottom of the precipice, and laid on the bank of a small stream, which ran noiselessly through the plain. John Davis, fearing some outbreak on the part of his angry comrades, himself undertook to let the captain down, in order to be certain that no accident would happen to him.

When the wounded men had been removed from the eagle's nest, the adventurers glided along the cliff with marvellous rapidity, and the whole band was soon collected on the bank of the stream. As is frequently the case in a mountainous country, the bottom of the barranca was a rather wide prairie, sheltered between two lofty hills, which enclosed it on the right and left, thus forming a species of gorge, which, at the spot where the fight took place, was a gulf of great depth.

John Davis, without losing an instant, did all he could for the Jaguar; while Ruperto, though much against the grain, did the same for the Mexican captain.

Meanwhile the night had slipped away, and the sun rose as the adventurers completed their perilous descent. The landscape then resumed its real aspect, and what had appeared by the flickering light of the torches a desolate and arid desert became a charming and smiling appearance.

The sun has enormous power over the human organisation: it not only dispels those sombre phantoms which are produced by darkness, but also restores to the body and mind their elasticity and vigour. With day, hope and joy returned to the heart of the adventurers; a joy-rendered more lively still by the sight of the gold-chests hurled over the previous night by the Mexicans, and which though crushed by their fall, had lost none of their precious contents.

The prairie soon assumed a lively aspect, to which it certainly was not accustomed; the adventurers lit fires, erected jacals, and the camp was formed in a few minutes. For a very lengthened period Davis' efforts to bring his friend to life remained sterile; still, the Jaguar had received no wound; he did not seem to have a limb broken; his syncope resulted solely from the moral effect of his horrible fall.

"At length he is saved!" the American suddenly exclaimed, joyously.

The adventurers surrounded their chief, anxiously watching his every movement. The young man soon opened his eyes again, and, helped by Davis, managed to sit up. A slight patch of red was visible on his cheek-bones, but the rest of his face retained an ashen hue. He looked slowly round him, and the wild expression of his glance gradually gave way. "Drink!" he muttered in a hollow and inarticulate voice.

John Davis uncorked his flask, bent over the wounded man, and placed it to his lips. The latter drank eagerly for two or three minutes, and then stopped with a sigh of relief.

"I fancied I was dead," he said. "Is Captain Melendez still alive?"

"Yes."

"What state is he in?"

"No worse than your own."

"All the better."

"Shall we hang him?" Ruperto remarked, still adhering to his notion.

"On your life," the Jaguar shouted, "not a hair of his head must fall; you answer for him to me, body for body."

And he added in a low voice, unintelligible by his hearers, "I swore it."

"'Tis a pity," Ruperto went on. "I am certain that hanging a Mexican captain would have produced an excellent effect."

The Jaguar made an angry gesture.

"All right," the adventurer continued; "if it is not pleasant to you, we will say no more about it."

"Enough," the young man said; "I have given my orders."

"That's enough. Don't be angry, captain; you shall be obeyed."

And Ruperto went off, growling, to see about the wounded man confided to

his care. On approaching the spot where the captain was laid, he could not restrain a cry of surprise.

"By Jupiter," he said, "that's a fellow who can boast of having a tough life, at any rate."

Either through the coolness of the morning breeze or some other cause, the captain had regained his senses.

"Hilloh!" the adventurer exclaimed, as he came up. "You seem better."

"Yes," the officer answered laconically.

"You will soon be cured, I can see; still, I may tell you that you had a very narrow escape."

"Where am I?"

"Don't you see? In a superb prairie, on the bank of a limpid stream," replied the adventurer.

"Let us have no insolence, fellow, but answer my questions plainly."

"You can, I suppose, recognise a borderers' camp."

"Then I am in the power of bandits?"

"Rather so," Ruperto replied, mockingly.

"Tell me the name of the chief whose prisoner I am?"

"The Jaguar."

"What!" the captain exclaimed; "is he not dead?"

"Why should he be, since you are alive? That seems to annoy you, does it? Still I must do you the justice of saying, that you did all you could to kill him; and if he be alive, on the word of a man, you have not the least cause to reproach yourself."

These words were accompanied by a sarcastic grin, which excited the captain's anger.

"Does your chief wish to impose a fresh torture on me," he said, "by sending you to insult me?"

"You misunderstand his kindly intentions; he ordered me to watch over your health, and offer you the most touching attentions," Ruperto answered, ironically.

"Then leave me, for I do not want your help; I seek nothing but repose."

"As you please, my officer; settle matters as you think proper. From the moment you refuse my assistance, I wash my hands of all that may happen, and withdraw; I do not care about your company."

And after giving the captain an ironic bow, the adventurer turned on his heel.

"What a pity," he muttered, "the captain will not permit that charming young man to be hung!"

As soon as he was alone, Captain Melendez let his head fall on his hands, and tried to arrange his ideas, which the shock he had received had utterly disorganised. Still he gradually yielded to a species of lethargy, the natural result of his fall, and soon fell into a deep sleep.

He slept peacefully for several hours, nothing happening to disturb his repose; and when he awoke he found himself quite a new man; the restorative he had enjoyed had completely rested his nervous system, his strength had returned, and it was with an indescribable feeling of joy that he rose and walked a few steps on the prairie. With calmness of mind, courage returned, and he was ready to recommence the contest.

Ruperto now returned with some provisions in a basket. The adventurer offered them to the captain with rough politeness, in which, however, the desire to be agreeable was perceptible. The captain readily accepted the food, and ate with an appetite that surprised himself after so serious a fall.

"Well," Ruperto remarked, "did I not tell you that you would soon be all right? it is just the same with the captain—he is as fresh as a floripondio, and was never better in his life."

"Tell me, my friend," Don Juan answered, "may I be allowed to speak with the chief?"

"Yes, and he even ordered me to ask you if you would allow him an interview after dinner."

"Most heartily; I am entirely at his orders; especially," the captain added with a smile, "since I am his prisoner."

"That is true; well, eat quietly, and while you are doing so I will convey your message."

Hereupon Ruperto left the captain, who did not require the invitation to be repeated, but vigorously attacked the provisions placed before him. His meal was soon over, and he had been walking up and down for some time, when he saw the Jaguar approach. The two men bowed ceremoniously, and examined each other for some moments with the greatest attention.

Up to this moment they had hardly seen one another; their interview of the previous evening had taken place in the darkness, and then both had fought obstinately; but they had found no time to form mutual opinions as they now did with the infallible glance of men who are accustomed to judge in a second persons with whom they have dealings. The Jaguar was first to break the silence.

"You will excuse, caballero," he said, "the rusticity of my reception: banished men have no other palace save the dome of the forests that shelter them."

The captain bowed.

"I was far from expecting," he said, "so much courtesy from—"

He stopped, not daring to utter the word that rose to his lips, through fear of offending the other.

"From bandits, I suppose, captain?" the Jaguar replied, with a smile. "Oh, no denial, I know what we are called at Mexico. Yes, caballero, at the present day we are outlaws, border-ruffians, freebooters; to-morrow, perhaps, we shall be heroes and saviours of a people; but so the world wags; but never mind that. You wish to speak to me."

"Did you not also evince a desire, caballero, to have an interview with me?"

"I did; I have only one question to ask you, though—will you answer it?"

"On my honour, if it be possible."

The Jaguar reflected, and then continued—

"You hate me, I suppose?"

"What makes you imagine that?"

"How do I know?" the Jaguar replied, with embarrassment; "a thousand reasons, as, for instance, the obstinacy with which you sought to take my life a few hours ago."

The captain drew himself up, and his face assumed a stern expression which it had not worn hitherto.

"I pledge you my word to be frank," he said.

"I thank you beforehand."

"Between yourself and me, personally, no hatred can exist—at any rate, not on my side; I do not know you, I only saw you yesterday for the first time; never to my knowledge have you come across my path before, hence I have no reason to hate you. But beside the man there is the soldier; as an officer in the Mexican army—"

"Enough, captain," the young man sharply interrupted him; "you have told me all I wished to know; political hatreds, however terrible they may be, are not eternal. You do your duty as I do mine—that is to say, as well as you possibly can, and to that I have no objection. Unfortunately, instead of fighting side by side, we are in opposite camps; but who knows whether we may not some day be friends?"

"We are so already, caballero," the captain said, warmly, as he held out his hand to the Jaguar.

The latter pressed it vigorously.

"Let us each follow the road traced for us," he said; "but if we fight for a different idea, let us maintain, while the contest is raging, that esteem and friendship which two loyal enemies ought to feel, who have measured their swords and found them of equal length."

"Agreed," said the captain.

"One word more," the Jaguar continued. "I must respond to your frankness by equal frankness."

"Speak."

"I presume that the question I asked surprised you?"

"I confess it."

"Well, I will tell you why I asked it."

"What good will that do?"

"I must; between us two there must be nothing hidden. In spite of the hatred I ought to feel for you, I am attracted to you by a secret sympathy, which I cannot explain, but which urges me to reveal to you a secret on which the happiness of my life depends."

"I do not understand you; your words appear strange to me. Explain yourself."

A feverish flush suddenly covered the Jaguar's face.

"Listen, captain; if you only know me to-day for the first time, your name has been ringing in my ears for many months past."

The officer gazed at him strangely.

"Yes, yes," the Jaguar continued; "she ever has your name on her lips—she only speaks of you. Only a few days back—but why recall that? suffice it for you to know that I love her to distraction."

"Carmela," the captain muttered.

"Yes," the Jaguar exclaimed; "you love her too!"

"I do," the captain replied, simply.

There was a lengthened silence between the two men. It was easy to discover that each of them was having an internal contest; at length the Jaguar managed to quell the storm that growled in his heart, and went on—

"Thank you for your straightforward answer, captain; in loving Carmela you take advantage of your right, just as I do; let this love, instead of separating, form a stronger link between us. Carmela is worthy of the love of an honest man; let us each love her, and carry on an open warfare, without treachery or trickery; all the better for the man she may prefer. She alone must be judge between us; let her follow her heart, for she is too pure and good to deceive herself and make a bad choice."

"Good!" the captain exclaimed. "You are a man after my own heart, Jaguar, and whatever may happen, I shall always feel happy to have pressed your honest hand, and to be counted among your friends. Yes, I love Carmela; for a smile from her rosy lips I would joyfully lay down my life."

"Viva Cristo!" the young man said, "I was sure we should end by coming to an understanding."

"To bring that about," the captain remarked, with a smile, "we only needed an explanation."

"I trust that it will not be repeated under similar conditions, for it is a perfect miracle that we are still alive."

"I am not at all anxious to repeat the experiment."

"Nor I either, that I swear. But the sun is rapidly declining on the horizon: I need not tell you that you are free, and at liberty to go wherever you please, if it is not your intention to remain any length of time with us: I have had a horse got ready which you will permit me to offer you."

"I gladly accept it: I do not wish to have any false pride with you, and afoot in these regions, which are quite strange to me, I should feel greatly embarrassed."

"That need not trouble you, for I will give you a guide to accompany you, till you get in the right road."

"A thousand thanks."

"Where do you propose going? Of course, if my question be indiscreet, I do not expect you to answer."

"I have nothing to hide from you; I intend joining General Rubio as quickly as possible, to whom I must report the accident that has happened to the *conducta de plata*, about which I do not reproach you."

"Had it been possible to save the *conducta* by courage and devotion, you would have doubtless done it."

"I thank you for this praise. But now I must be off."

The Jaguar made a signal to a borderer standing a short distance off.

"The captain's horse," he said.

Five minutes later this borderer, who was no other than Ruperto, reappeared, leading two horses, one of which was a magnificent mustang, with delicate limbs and flashing eye. The captain reached the saddle at one leap, and Ruperto was already mounted. The two enemies, henceforth friends, shook hands for the last time, and after an affectionate parting, the captain started.

"Mind, no tricks, Ruperto!" the Jaguar said, in a stern voice to the adventurer.

"All right, all right!" the latter growled in reply.

CHAPTER V.

GENERAL RUBIO.

GENERAL DON JOSE MARIA RUBIO was in no way distinguished from the generality of ignorant Mexican officers, but he possessed over those who surrounded him the immense advantage of being a soldier of the war of Independence, and in him experience amply compensated for his lack of education. His history may be told in a few words.

Son of an evangelista, or public writer, at Tampico, he had learned to read and write under the auspices of his father; this pretence at education was destined to be of great utility to him at a later date. The great uprising, of which the celebrated Fray Hidalgo was the promoter, and which inaugurated the revolution, found young Jose Maria wandering about the neighbourhood of Tampico, where he gained a livelihood by the most heterogeneous trades. The young man—a little bit of a muleteer, a little bit of a fisherman, and a good deal of a smuggler—intoxicated by the smell of gunpowder, and fascinated by the omnipotent influence Hidalgo exercised over all those who approached him,

threw his gun over his shoulder, mounted the first horse he came across, and joined the revolutionary band. From that moment his life was only one long succession of combats.

He became in a short time, thanks to his courage, energy, and presence of mind, one of the most formidable guerillas. Always the first in attack, the last to retreat, chief of a cuadrilla composed of picked men, to whom the most daring and wild expeditions appeared but child's play, and favoured by constant good luck—for fortune ever loves the rash—Jose Maria soon became a terror to the Spaniards. After serving in turn under all the heroes of the Mexican war of Independence, and fighting bravely by their side, peace found him a brigadier-general.

General Rubio was not ambitious; he was a brave and honest soldier, who loved his profession, and who needed to render him happy the roll of the drum, the lustre of arms, and military life in its fullest extent. When he fought, the idea never occurred to him that the war would end some day or other; and hence he was quite surprised and perfectly demoralised when peace was proclaimed.

The worthy general looked round him. Everybody was preparing to retire to the bosom of his family, and enjoy a dearly-purchased repose. Don Jose Maria might perhaps have desired nothing better than to follow the example; but his family was the army. During the ten years' fighting which had just elapsed, the general had completely lost sight of all the relations he ever possessed. His father, whose death he learned accidentally, was the sole person whose influence might have brought him to abandon a military career; but the paternal hearth was cold. Nothing attracted him home, and he therefore remained under the banner, though not through ambition. The worthy soldier did himself justice, and recognised the fact that he had attained a position far superior to any he might ever have dared to desire.

At the period when the Texans began agitating and claiming their independence, the Mexican government, deceived at the outset by the agents appointed to watch that state, sent insufficient forces to re-establish order, and crush the insurgents: but the movement soon assumed such a distinctly revolutionary character, that the president found it urgent to make an effective demonstration. Unfortunately it was too late; the dissatisfaction had spread; it was no longer a question of suppressing a revolt, but stifling a revolution.

The troops sent to Texas were beaten and driven back on all sides; but the government could not, and would not, accept such a dishonouring check inflicted by badly-armed and undisciplined bands, and they resolved to make a last and decisive effort. Numerous troops were massed on the Texan frontiers; and to terrify the insurgents, and finish with them at one blow, a grand military demonstration was made.

But the war then changed its character: the Texans, nearly all North Americans, skilful hunters, indefatigable marchers, and marksmen of proverbial reputation, broke up into small bands, and instead of offering the Mexican troops a front, which would have enabled them to outmanœuvre and crush them, they began a hedge war, full of tricks and ambushes, after the manner of the Vendéans.

The position became more and more critical. The rebels, disciplined, hardened, and strong in the moral support of their fellow-citizens, who applauded their successes, and put up vows for them, had boldly raised the flag of Texan independence, and after several engagements, in which they decimated the troops sent against them, compelled the latter to recognise them as the avowed defenders of an honourable cause.

Among the numerous generals of the republic, the president at length chose the only man capable of repairing the successive disasters undergone by the government. General Don José Maria Rubio was invested with the supreme command of the troops detached to act against Texas.

He at once changed the tactics employed by his predecessors, and adopted a system diametrically opposite. Instead of fatiguing his troops by purposeless marches which had no result, he seized on the strongest positions, scattered his troops through cantonments, where they supported each other, and in case of need could all be assembled under his orders within four-and-twenty hours.

When these precautions were taken, still keeping his forces in hand, he prudently remained on the defensive, and instead of marching forward, watched with indefatigable patience for the opportunity to fall on the enemy suddenly and crush him.

The Texan chiefs soon comprehended all the danger of these new and skilful tactics. In fact, they had changed parts; instead of being attacked, the insurgents were obliged to become the assailants, which made them lose all the advantages of their position, by compelling them to concentrate their troops, and make a demonstration of strength, contrary to their usual habits of fighting.

The *conducta de plata* intrusted to Captain Melendez had an immense importance in the eyes of the needy government of the capital; the dollars must at all hazards reach Mexico in safety.

General Rubio therefore found himself reluctantly compelled to modify the line he had traced; he did not doubt that the insurgents would make the greatest efforts to intercept and seize the *conducta*, for they also suffered from a great want of money. Hence their plans must be foiled and the *conducta* saved. For this purpose the general collected a large body of troops, placed himself at their head, and advanced by forced marches to the entrance of the defile, where, from the reports of his spies, he knew that the insurgents were ambuscaded; then, as we have seen, he sent off a sure man (or whom he supposed to be) to Captain Melendez, to warn him of his approach, and put him on his guard.

We have narrated what took place.

The Mexican camp stood in the centre of a beautiful plain, facing the defile through which the *conducta* must pass, according to the general's instructions. It was evening, and the sun had set for about an hour. Don José Maria, rendered anxious by the captain's delay, had sent off scouts in different directions to bring him news, and a prey to an agitation, which each moment that passed augmented, was walking anxiously about his tent, cursing and swearing in a low voice, frowning and stopping every now and then to listen.

General Don José Maria Rubio was still a young man; he was about forty-two, though he seemed older, through the fatigues of a military life, which had left rude marks on his martial and open countenance; he was tall and well-oiled; his muscular limbs, his wide and projecting chest, denoted great vigour; and though his close-shaven hair was beginning to turn grey, his black eye had a brilliancy full of youth and intelligence.

Contrary to the habits of Mexican general officers, who make a great display of embroidery, and are gilded and plumed like charlatans, his uniform had a simplicity and severity which added to his military appearance.

A sabre and a pair of holster-pistols were carelessly thrown across a map on the table in the centre of the room. The gallop of a horse, at first distant, but which rapidly drew nearer, was heard. The sentinel outside the tent challenged, "Who goes there?"

The horseman stopped, and a moment later the curtain of the tent was thrust aside, and a man appeared.

It was Captain Don Juan Melendez.

"Here you are, at last!" the general exclaimed.

Then noticing the expression of sorrow spread over the officer's features, the general's face again assumed an anxious look.

"Oh, oh!" he said, "what can have happened? Captain, has any mishap occurred to the conducta?"

The officer bowed his head.

"What is the meaning of this, sir?" the general continued angrily; "have you suddenly grown dumb?"

"No, general," answered the captain.

"The conducta! where is the conducta?" he went on, violently.

"Captured!" Don Juan replied, in a hollow voice.

"Viva Dios!" the general shouted; "the conducta captured, and yourself alive to bring the news?"

"I could not get myself killed."

"By Heaven, I really believe," the general said, ironically, "that you have not even received a scratch."

"It is true."

The general walked up and down the tent. "And your soldiers," he went on, a minute later, "I suppose they fled at the first shot?"

"My soldiers are dead, general."

"What do you say?"

"I say, general, that my soldiers fell to the last man defending the trust confided to their honour."

"Hum, hum!" the general remarked, "all dead?"

"Yes, general; all lie in a bloody grave; I am the only survivor of fifty brave and devoted men."

There was a second silence. The general knew the captain too well to doubt his courage and honour. He began to suspect a mystery.

"But I sent you a guide," he at length said.

"Yes, general, and it was he who led us into the trap laid by the insurgents."

"A thousand demons! if the scoundrel——"

"He is dead," said the captain; "I killed him."

"Good. But there is something about the affair I cannot understand."

"General," the young man exclaimed, "though the conducta is lost, the fight was glorious for the Mexican name. Our honour has not suffered."

"Come, captain, you are one of those men above suspicion, whom not the slightest stain can affect. If necessary, I would go bail for your loyalty and bravery before the world. Report to me frankly all that has happened, and I will believe you; give me the fullest details about this action, in order that I may know whether I have to pity or punish you."

The captain bowed, and began an exact report of what had taken place.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HUNTERS' COUNCIL.

We will now return to Tranquil. The Canadian had left his friends two musket-shots from the Texan encampment, intending, were it required, to call

in Carmela: but that was not necessary; the young man, though unwillingly, had consented to all the Canadian asked of him, with which the latter was delighted, for without knowing exactly why, he would have been sorry to facilitate an interview between the young people.

Immediately after his conversation with the leader of the Freebooters, the hunter rose and left the camp. He then remounted his horse and returned thoughtfully to the spot where his friends were camping. The latter were awaiting him anxiously, and Carmela especially was suffering from a terrible uneasiness.

It was a strange fact, which women alone can explain, that the maiden, perhaps unconsciously, entertained toward the Jaguar and Captain Melendez feelings which she was afraid to analyse, but which led her to take an equal interest in the fate of those two men, and fear a collision between them, whatever the result might have proved.

Was it friendship, or was it love? Who can answer?

Tranquil found his friends located in a narrow clearing, near a fire, over which their next meal was cooking. Carmela, a little apart, watched the path by which she knew the hunter must return. So soon as she perceived him, she uttered a suppressed cry of delight, and made a movement to run and meet him; but she checked herself with a flush, let her head droop, and concealed herself timidly behind a clump of floripondios.

Tranquil peacefully dismounted, took the bridle off his horse, and then sat down by the side of Loyal Heart.

"Ouf!" he said, "here I am, back again."

"Did you run any dangers?" Loyal Heart asked.

"Not at all; on the contrary, the Jaguar received me as a friend; and I have only to complain of his courtesy."

Carmela had softly come up to the hunter; and, bending her head down to him, she offered him her forehead to kiss.

"Good day, father," she said demurely; "you have already returned?"

"Already!" Tranquil answered, as he kissed her and laughed; "hang it, girl, it seems as if my absence did not appear to you long."

"You are unkind, father," she answered, with a pout, "you always give a false meaning to what I say."

"Only think of that, *senorita*! well, do not be in a passion, I have brought you good news."

"Speak, speak, father," she exclaimed eagerly, as she took the seat allotted her.

"You seem to take great interest in Captain Melendez?"

"I, father!" she exclaimed with a start of surprise.

"Hang it! I fancy a young lady must feel a lively interest in a person, to take such a step for his sake as you have done."

The maiden became serious.

"Father," she said, a moment later, "I could not tell you why I acted as I did; I swear that it was against my will: I was mad; the thought that the captain and the Jaguar were about to engage in a mortal combat, made me chill at heart; and yet I assure you, now that I am cool, I question myself in vain to discover the reason which urged me to intercede with you to prevent that combat."

The hunter shook his head.

"All that is not clear, Nina," he replied; "I do not at all understand your arguments: but take care, my girl, take care."

Carmela pensively leant her blushing brow on the Canadian's shoulder, and lifted to him her large blue eyes full of tears.

"I do not know why, but my heart is contracted, my bosom is oppressed. Oh, I am very unhappy."

And hiding her head in her hand, she burst into tears.

"You unhappy!" Tranquil exclaimed as he smote his head passionately. "Oh, whatever has been done to her, that she should weep thus!"

There was a silence of some minutes' duration, when the conversation seemed to take a confidential turn. Loyal Heart and Lanzi rose quietly, and soon disappeared in the chapparal. Tranquil and the maiden were hence alone. The hunter was suffering from one of those cold fits of passion which are so terrible because so concentrated; adoring the girl, he fancied in his simple ignorance that it was he who, without suspecting it, through the coarseness and frivolity of his manner, rendered her unhappy, and he accused himself in his heart for not having secured her that calm and pleasant life he had dreamed for her.

"Forgive me, my child," he said to her with emotion; "forgive me for being the involuntary cause of your suffering. You must not be angry with me, for really it is no fault of mine; I have always lived alone in the desert, and never learned how to treat natures so frail as those of women; but henceforth I will watch myself. You will have no reason to reproach me again. I promise you I will do all you wish, my darling child."

By a sudden reaction, the maiden wiped away her tears, and bursting into a joyous laugh, threw her arms round the hunter's neck, and kissed him repeatedly.

"It is you who should pardon me, father," she said in her wheedling voice, "for I seem to take pleasure in tormenting you, who are so kind to me; I did not know what I was saying just now; I am not unhappy, I do not suffer, I am quite happy, and love you dearly, my good father; I only love you."

Tranquil looked at her in alarm; he could not understand these sudden changes of humour.

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, clasping his hands in terror; "my daughter is mad!"

At this exclamation, the laughing girl's gaiety was augmented.

"I am not mad, father," she said; "I was so just now when I spoke to you in the way I did, but now the crisis has passed; forgive me, and think no more about it."

"Hum!" the hunter muttered; "I desire nothing more, Nina; but I am no further on than I was before, and on my word, I understand nothing of what is passing through your mind."

"What matter, so long as I love you, father? all girls are so, and no importance must be attached to their caprices."

"Good, good, it must be so since you say it, little one."

Carmela lovingly kissed him.

"And the Jaguar?" she asked.

"All is arranged; the captain has nothing to fear from him."

"Oh, the Jaguar has a noble heart; if he has pledged his word, he may be trusted."

"He has given it me."

"Thanks, father. Well, now that all is arranged according to our wishes—"

"Your wishes?" the hunter interrupted.

"Mine or yours, father—is not that the same thing?"

"That is true—I was wrong. Go on."

"Well, I say, call your friends, who are walking about close by, I suppose, and let me eat, for I am dying of hunger."

The Canadian whistled, and the two men, who probably only awaited this

signal, made their appearance at once. The venison was removed from the fire, laid on a leaf, and all seated themselves comfortably.

"Hilloh!" Tranquil said all at once, "why, where is Quoniam?"

"He left us shortly after your departure," Loyal Heart made answer, "to go to the Larch-tree hacienda."

"All right; but I am not anxious about my old comrade, for he will manage to find us again."

Each then began eating with good appetite, and troubled themselves no further about the negro's absence.

During the hunters' meal the sun had set, and night invaded the forest. Carmela, exhausted by the various events of the day, retired almost immediately to a light jacal of leaves which Loyal Heart had built for her.

When they were alone, the hunters laid in a stock of dead wood, which would keep the fire in all night, then, after throwing on some handfuls of dry branches, they sat down in Indian fashion, that is to say, with their back to the flame, so that their eyes might not be dazzled by the light, and they could distinguish in the gloom the arrival of any unwelcome guest, man or wild beast. When this precaution had been taken, and the rifles laid within hand-reach, they lit their pipes and smoked silently.

The night was cold and clear; a profusion of light flashed from the millions of stars that studded the dark olive sky, and the moon poured on the earth her silvery rays, which imparted a fantastic appearance to objects. The atmosphere was so pure and transparent, that the eye could distinguish, as in bright day, the surrounding landscape. Several hours passed thus.

"Who will keep watch to-night?" Lanzi at length asked, as he passed the stem of his pipe through his belt; "we are surrounded by people amongst whom it is wise to take precautions."

"That is true," said Loyal Heart; "do you sleep."

"One moment," the Canadian said; "if sleep does not too greatly overpower you, Lanzi, we will profit by Carmela's absence to hold a council. The situation in which we are is intolerable for a girl, and we must make up our minds to some course at once. Unluckily, I know not what to do."

"I am at your orders, Tranquil," Lanzi answered; "let us hold a council, and I will make up for it by sleeping faster."

"Speak, my friend," said Loyal Heart.

"Life," began the hunter, "is rough in the desert for delicate natures: we men, accustomed to fatigue, and hardened to privations, not only support it without thinking of it, but even find delight in it."

"That is true," Loyal Heart observed; "but the dangers that men such as we can bear, it would be unjust and cruel to inflict on a woman, whose life has hitherto passed exempt from care, privations, or fatigue of any description."

"Yes," Lanzi supported him.

"That is to the point," Tranquil continued; "though it will cost me a pang to part with her, Carmela can no longer remain with us."

"It would kill her," said Loyal Heart.

"It would not take long, poor little darling," Lanzi pouted.

"Yes; but to whom can I trust her now that the venta is destroyed?"

"It is a difficult point," Lanzi observed.

"Stay," said Loyal Heart, "are you not tigrero to the Larch-tree hacienda?"

"I am."

"Well, the master of the hacienda," Loyal Heart continued, "will not refuse to receive Carmela in his house."

The runter shook his head in denial. "No, no," he said; "if I once asked me favour of him, I feel certain he would consent; but it cannot be."

"Why?"

"Because the owner of the Larch-tree is not the man we need to protect a girl."

"Hum!" Loyal Heart said; "our situation is growing complicated, for I know nobody else who would take charge of her."

"Nor I either, and that is what vexes me."

"Listen!" Loyal Heart suddenly exclaimed. "I do not know, Heaven pardon me, where my head was that I did not think of it at once. Do not be alarmed; I know somebody."

"Speak, speak."

"Come," the half-breed said aside, "this Loyal Heart is really a capital fellow, for he is full of good ideas."

"For reasons too long to tell you," the young man continued, "I am not alone in the desert, for my mother and an old servant of my family live about three hundred miles from where we now are with a tribe of Comanches, whose chief adopted me a few years back. My mother is kind, she loves me madly, and will be delighted to treat your charming child as a daughter. Coming with me, the Indians will receive you kindly, and my mother will thank you for confiding your daughter to her."

"Loyal Heart," the Canadian answered, with emotion, "your offer is that of an honest, upright man. I accept it as frankly as you make it; by the side of your mother my daughter will be happy, and she will have nothing to fear. Thanks. When do we start?" the Canadian asked.

"The road is a long one," Loyal Heart answered. "We have more than three hundred miles to ride; Carmela is exhausted by the fatigue she has endured for some time past, and perhaps we should do well to grant her a day or two of rest."

"Yes, you are right; this journey, which would be as nothing to us, is enormous for a girl; let us remain here a couple of days—the camp is good, and the spot well selected."

"During the time we spend here our horses too will regain their fire and vigour, and we can profit by the rest to get some provisions together."

"Very good," Tranquil said, with a smile. "So now, good night, brother."

"Good night!" Loyal Heart answered, and, lying down, was soon sound asleep. Tranquil, however, required to isolate himself for some hours, in order to go over the events which during the last few days had fallen upon him so unexpectedly, and broken up that placidity of life to which he had grown accustomed.

The hours passed away, but the hunter felt no desire for sleep. The stars were beginning to pale, the horizon was crossed by pale bands, the breeze grew colder and colder; all foreboded, in fact, the approach of dawn, when suddenly a slight noise, resembling that produced by the fracture of a dry bough, smote on the hunter's practised ear, and caused him to start.

CHAPTER VII.

AN OLD FRIEND.

TRANQUIL was too old and too crafty a wood-ranger to let himself be surprised. With his eyes obstinately fixed on the spot whence the sound had come, he

tried to pierce the darkness, and distinguish any movement in the chapparal, which would permit him to form probable conjectures as to the visitors who were approaching.

For some time the noise was not repeated, and the desert had fallen back into silence. But the Canadian did not deceive himself. Up to all Indian tricks, and knowing the unbounded patience of the red-skins, he continued to keep on his guard; still, as he suspected that in the darkness searching glances were fixed on him and spying his slightest movements, Tranquil yawned twice or thrice, as if overcome by sleep, drew back the hand he had laid on his rifle-barrel, and pretending to be unable to resist sleep any longer, he let his head sink on his chest.

Nothing stirred. An hour elapsed and still Tranquil felt confident that he had not deceived himself. The sky grew brighter, the last star had disappeared, the horizon was assuming those fiery tints which immediately precede the appearance of the sun: the Canadian, weary of this long watching, and not knowing to what he should attribute this inaction on the part of the red-skins, resolved at last to obtain the solution of the enigma. He therefore started suddenly to his feet and took up his rifle.

At the same moment a noise of footsteps, mingled with the rustling of leaves and the breaking of dry branches, smote his ear.

"Ah, ah!" the Canadian muttered; "it seems they have made up their mind at last."

Then a clear feminine voice rose harmoniously and sonorously from the wood. Tranquil stopped with a start of surprise. This voice was singing an Indian melody.

"I confide my heart to thee in the name of the Omnipotent.
I am unhappy, and no one takes pity on me;
Still God is great in my eyes,"

"Oh!" the hunter muttered, "I know that song, it is that of the betrothed of the Snake Pawnees. How is it that these words strike my ear so far from their hunting-grounds? Can a detachment of Pawnees be wandering in the neighbourhood?"

Without further hesitation the hunter walked hurriedly toward the thicket, from the centre of which the melody had been audible. But at the moment he was about to enter it, the shrubs were quickly parted and two red-skins entered the clearing.

On coming within ten paces of the hunter the Indians stopped and stretched their arms out in front of them, with fingers parted in sign of peace; then, crossing their arms on their chest, they waited. At this manifestation of the peaceful sentiments of the new comers, the Canadian rested the butt of his rifle on the ground, and examined the Indians with a rapid glance.

The first was a man of lofty stature, with intelligent features and open countenance; as far as it was possible to judge the age of an Indian, he seemed to have passed the middle stage of life. He was dressed in his full war-paint, and the condor plume, fastened above his right ear, indicated that he held the rank of a sachem.

The other red-skin was a woman of twenty at the most; she was slim, active, and elegant, and her dress was decorated in accordance with the rules of Indian coquetry: still her worn features, on which only the fugitive traces of a prematurely vanished beauty were visible, showed that, like all Indian squaws, she had been pitilessly compelled to do all those rude household tasks, which the men regard as beneath their dignity.

At the sight of these two persons the hunter felt an emotion for which he could not account; the more he regarded the warrior standing before him the more he seemed to find again in this martial countenance the distant memory of the features of a man he had formerly known, though it was impossible for him to recall how or where this intimacy had existed; but overcoming his feelings, and comprehending that his lengthened silence must appear extraordinary to the persons who had been waiting so long for him to address to them the compliments of welcome which Indian etiquette demands, he at length decided on speaking.

"The sachem can approach without fear and take his seat by the fire of a friend," he said.

"The voice of the pale hunter rejoices the heart of the chief," the warrior said; "he will smoke the calumet of friendship with the pale hunter."

The Canadian bowed politely; the sachem gave his squaw a sign to follow him, and he crouched on his heels in front of the fire, where Loyal Heart and Lanzi were still asleep. Tranquil and the warrior then began smoking silently while the young Indian squaw was busily engaged with the household duties and preparing the morning meal.

There was a lengthened silence. The hunter was reflecting, while the Indian was apparently completely absorbed by his pipe. At last he shook the ash out of the calumet, thrust the stem through his belt, and turned to his host.

"The walkon and the maukawis," he said, "always sing the same song; the man who has heard them during the moons of spring recognises them in the moons of winter. It is not the same with man; he forgets quickly; his heart does not bound at the recollection of a friend."

"What does the chief mean?" the other asked, astonished at these words, which seemed to convey a reproach.

"The Wacondah is powerful," the Indian continued; "it is he who dictates the words my breast breathes; the sturdy oak forgets that he has been a frail sapling."

"Explain yourself, chief," the hunter said, with great agitation; "the sound of your voice causes me singular emotion; your features are not unknown to me; speak, who are you?"

"Singing-bird," the Indian said, addressing the young woman, "you are the *cihuatl* of a sachem; ask the great pale hunter why he has forgotten his friend?"

"I will obey," she answered, in a melodious voice; "but the chief is deceived: the great pale hunter has not forgotten the Wah-rush-a-menec."

"Oh!" Tranquil exclaimed, "are you really Black-deer, my brother? my heart warned me secretly of your presence, and though your features had almost faded from my memory, I expected to find a friend again."

"Wah! is the pale-face speaking the truth?" the chief said, with emotion: "has he really retained the memory of his brother, Black-deer?"

"Ah, chief," the hunter said, sadly; "to doubt any longer would be an insult to me; how could I expect to meet you here, at such a distance from the wigwams of your nation?"

"That is true," the Indian remarked, thoughtfully.

"And," Tranquil continued, "is that charming squaw I see there, the Singing-bird, that frail child whom I so often tossed on my knee?"

"Singing-bird is the wife of a chief," the Indian answered, flattered by the compliment; "at the next fall of the leaves forty-five moons will have passed since Black-deer bought her of her father for two mustangs and a panther-skin quiver."

Singing-bird smiled, and went on with her duties.

"Will the chief permit me to ask how the sachem knew that he would find me here?"

"Black-deer was ignorant of it: he was not seeking the great pale hunter; the Wacondah has permitted him to find a friend again, and he is grateful."

Tranquil looked at the warrior in surprise. He smiled.

"Black-deer has no secret from his brother," he said; "the pale hunter will wait; soon he shall know all."

"My brother is free to speak or be silent; I will wait."

At this moment the hunter felt a light hand laid on his shoulder, while a soft and affectionate voice murmured in his ear—"Good morning, father."

And a kiss completed the silence.

"Good morning, little one," the hunter replied, with a smile; "did you sleep well?"

"Splendidly, father; but I see visitors have arrived."

"Yes, old friends, who, I hope, will soon be yours."

"Red-skins friends?" she whispered.

"All of them are not wicked," he answered with a smile: "these are kind." Then, turning to the Indian woman, who had fixed her black-velvet eyes on Carmela with simple admiration, he called out, "Singing-bird!"

The squaw bounded up like a young antelope. "What does my father want?" she asked, bowing gently.

"Singing-bird," the hunter continued, "this girl is my daughter, Carmela. Love one another like sisters."

"Singing-bird will feel very happy to be loved by the White-lily," the Indian squaw replied.

Carmela, charmed at the name which the squaw had given her, bent down and kissed her forehead.

"I love you already, sister," she said to her, and holding her by the hand, they went off together. Tranquil looked after them with a tender glance. Black-deer had witnessed this little scene with that Indian phlegm which nothing ever disturbs: still, when he found himself alone with the hunter, he bent over to him, and said in a slightly shaking voice—

"Wah! my brother has not changed: the moons of winter have scattered snow over his scalp, but his heart has remained as good as when it was young."

At this moment the sleepers awoke.

"Hilloh!" Loyal Heart said gaily, as he looked up at the sun, "I have had a long sleep."

"To tell you the truth," Lanzi observed, "I am not an early bird, but I will make up for it. The poor horses must be thirsty, so I will give them water."

"Very good!" said Tranquil; "by the time you have done that, breakfast will be ready."

Lanzi rose, leaped on his horse, and seizing the lasso of the others, went off in the direction of the stream without asking questions relative to the strangers. On the prairie it is so: a guest is an envoy of God, whose presence must arouse no curiosity. In the meanwhile Loyal Heart had also risen: suddenly his glance fell on the Indian chief; the young man turned pale as a corpse, and hurriedly approached the chief.

"My mother!" he exclaimed in a voice quivering with emotion, "my mother—"

He could say no more. The Pawnee bowed peacefully to him.

"My brother's mother is still the cherished child of the Wacondah," he answered in a gentle voice.

"Thanks, chief," the young man said with a sigh of relief; "forgive this start of terror which I could not overcome, but on perceiving you I feared lest some misfortune had happened."

"A son must love his mother: my brother's feeling is natural. When I left the Village of Flowers, the old greyhead, the companion of my brother's mother, wished to start with me."

"Poor Nô Eusebio," the young man muttered, "he is so devoted to us."

"The sachems would not consent; greyhead is necessary to my brother's mother."

"They were right, chief; but why did you not awake me on your arrival?"

"Loyal Heart was asleep. Black-deer did not wish to trouble his sleep: he waited."

"Good! my brother is a chief; he acted as he thought advisable."

"Black-deer is intrusted with a message from the sachems to Loyal Heart. He wishes to smoke the calumet in council with him."

"Good! my brother can speak; I am listening."

Tranquil rose, and threw his rifle over his shoulder.

"Where is the hunter going?" the Indian asked.

"While you tell Loyal Heart the message I will take a stroll in the forest."

"The white hunter will remain; Black-deer has nothing to conceal. The wisdom of my brother is great; he was brought up by the red-skins."

"But perhaps you have things to tell Loyal Heart which only concern yourselves."

"I have nothing to say which my brother should not hear; my brother will disoblige me by withdrawing."

"I will remain, then, chief, since such is the case."

The methodical Indian now drew out his calumet, and, to display the importance of the commission with which he was entrusted, instead of filling it with ordinary tobacco, he placed in it *morhichee*, or sacred tobacco, which he produced from a little parchment bag he took from the pouch all Indians wear when travelling, and which contains their medicine-bag and the few articles indispensable for a long journey. When the calumet was filled, he lit it from a coal he moved from the fire by the aid of a medicine-rod, decorated with feathers and bills.

These extraordinary preparations led the hunters to suppose that Black-deer was really the bearer of important news, and they prepared to listen to him with all proper gravity. The sachem inhaled two or three whiffs of smoke, then passed the calumet to Tranquil, who, after performing the same operation, handed it to Loyal Heart. The calumet went the round thus, until all the tobacco was consumed.

During this ceremony, which is indispensable at every Indian council, the three men remained silent. When the pipe was out, the chief emptied the ash into the fire, while muttering a few unintelligible words, which, however, were probably an invocation to the Great Spirit; he then thrust the pipe in his girdle, and after reflecting for some moments, rose and began speaking.

"Loyal Heart," he said, "you left the Village of Flowers to follow the hunting-path at daybreak of the third sun of the moon of the falling leaves. Well, during that period many things have occurred, which demand your immediate presence in the tribe of which you are one of the adopted sons. The war-hatchet, so deeply buried for ten moons between the prairie Comanches and the Buffalo Apaches, has suddenly been dug up in full council, and the Apaches are preparing to follow the war-trail, under the orders of the wisest and most

experienced chiefs of the nation. Your heart is strong, you will obey the orders of your fathers, and fight for them."

Loyal heart bowed his head in assent.

"No one doubted you," the chief continued; "still, for a war against the Apaches, the sachems would not have claimed your help; the Apaches are chattering old women, whom Comanche children can drive off with their dog-whips. The Long Knives of the East and the Yoris have also dug up the hatchet, and both have offered to treat with the Comanches. An alliance with the pale-faces is not very agreeable to red-skins; still, their anxiety is great, as they do not know which side to take, or which party to protect."

Black-deer was silent.

"The situation is indeed grave," Loyal Heart answered; "it is even critical."

"The chiefs, divided in opinion, and not knowing which is the better," Black-deer continued, "sent me off in all haste to find my brother, whose wisdom they are aware of, and promise to follow his advice."

"I am very young," Loyal Heart answered, "to venture to give my advice in such a matter, and settle so arduous a question."

"My brother is young, but wisdom speaks by his mouth. The Wacondah breathes in his heart the words his lips utter; all the chiefs feel respect for him."

The young man shook his head, as if protesting against such a mark of deference. "Since you insist," he said, "I will speak; but I will not give my opinion till I have heard that of this hunter, who is better acquainted with the desert than I am."

"Wah," said Black-deer, "the pale hunter is wise; his advice must be good; a chief is listening to him."

Thus compelled to explain his views, Tranquil had involuntarily to take part in the discussion; but he did not feel at all inclined to take on himself the responsibility of the heavy burden which Loyal Heart tried to throw off his own shoulders. Still, he was too thoroughly a man of the desert to refuse giving his opinion in council, especially upon so important a question.

"The Comanches are the most terrible warriors of the prairie," he said; "no one must try to invade their hunting-grounds; if they make war with the Apaches, who are vagabond and cowardly thieves, they are in the right to do so; but for what good object would they interfere in the quarrels of the pale-faces? Whether Yoris or Long Knives, the whites have ever been, at all times and under all circumstances, the obstinate enemies of the red-skins, killing them wherever they may find them, under the most futile pretexts, and for the most time simply because they are Indians. To the red-skins the pale-faces are coyotes thirsting for blood. The Comanches should leave them to devour each other; whichever party may triumph, those who have been killed will be so many enemies the fewer for the Indians. This war between the pale-faces has been going on for two years, implacably and obstinately. Up to the present the Comanches have remained neutral; why should they interfere now? I have spoken."

"Yes," Loyal Heart said, "you have spoken well, Tranquil. The opinion you have offered the Comanches ought to follow, an interference on their part would be an act of deplorable folly."

Black-deer had carefully listened to the Canadian's speech, and it appeared to have produced an impression; he listened in the same way to Loyal Heart, and when the latter had ceased speaking, the chief remained thoughtful for a while, and then replied—

"I am pleased with the words of my brothers, for they prove to me that I regarded the situation correctly. I gave the council of the chiefs the same advice my brothers just offered.

"I am ready to support in council," Loyal Heart remarked, "the opinions the white hunter has offered, for they are the only ones which should prevail."

"I think so too. Loyal Heart will accompany the chiefs to the callis of the nation?"

"It is my intention to start on my return to-morrow; if my brother can wait till then, we will start together."

"I will wait."

"Good; to-morrow at daybreak we will follow the return trail in company."

The council was over, yet Tranquil tried vainly to explain to himself how it was that Black-deer, whom he had left among the Snake Pawnees, could now be an influential chief of the Comanche nation; and the connection between Loyal Heart and the chief perplexed him not a bit less. All these ideas troubled the hunter's head, and he promised himself on the first opportunity to ask Black-deer for the history of his life since their separation.

As soon as Lanzi returned, the hunters and Carmela sat down to breakfast, waited on by Singing-bird.

CHAPTER VIII.

QUONIAM'S RETURN.

THE meal did not take long; each of the guests, busied with secret thoughts, ate quietly and silently. Tranquil, though he did not like to ask any questions of Black-deer or Loyal Heart, for all that, burned to learn by what concourse of extraordinary events these two men, who had started from diametrically opposite points, had eventually grown into such close intimacy.

But the Tiger-killer was too well acquainted with prairie manners to try and lead the conversation to a topic which might perhaps have displeased his comrades, and which, at any rate, would have displayed a curiosity on his part unworthy of an old wood-ranger.

Carmela felt a great friendship for Singing-bird, and so soon as the meal was ended, led her off to the jacal, where both began chattering. In accordance with the arrangements the hunters had made, Loyal Heart and Tranquil took their rifles, and entered the forest on opposite sides, to go in quest of game. Black-deer and Lanzi remained behind.

The two men, lying on the ground side by side, slept or smoked with that apathy and careless indolence peculiar to men who despise talking for the sake of talking. Several hours passed away thus, nothing occurring to trouble the calmness and silence that reigned over the bivouac, except at intervals the joyous laughter of the two young women, which brought a slight smile to the lips of the hunters.

A little before sunset the others returned, almost simultaneously, bending beneath the weight of the game they had killed. Loyal Heart, moreover, had lassoed a horse, which he brought in for Black-deer, who had not one. The sight of this animal caused the adventurers some alarm, and numerous conjectures. It was not at all wild; it allowed Loyal Heart to approach it

without difficulty, who made a prisoner of it almost without opposition. Moreover, it was completely equipped in the Mexican fashion.

Tranquil concluded from this, after reflection for a moment, that the Freebooters had attacked the *conducta de plata*, and the animal, whose rider had probably been killed, had escaped during the action.

After a lengthy discussion, it was at last agreed that so soon as night had completely set in, Black-deer should go reconnoitring, while those who remained in the camp redoubled their vigilance.

The sun was just disappearing behind the dense mass of lofty mountains that marked the horizon, when the hurried paces of a horse were heard a short distance off. The hunters seized their weapons, and posted themselves behind the enormous boles of the sumach trees that surrounded them, in order to be ready for any event. At this moment the cry of the blue jay was repeated twice.

"Take your places again at the fire," Tranquil said; "'tis a friend."

In fact, a few moments later, the branches cracked, the shrubs were thrust aside, and Quoniam made his appearance. After nodding to the company, he dismounted, and sat down by the side of the Panther-killer.

"Well, the latter asked him, "what news have you?"

"Plenty," he answered.

"Then, I suppose, you have been reconnoitring?"

"I did not have the trouble to ask questions; I only required to listen in order to learn in an hour more news than I could have discovered in a year."

"Oh, oh," the Canadian said, "eat, and when your appetite is satisfied, you will tell us all you have learnt."

"I wish for nothing better, especially as there are sundry matters it is as well for you to know."

"Eat then without further delay, that you may be able to talk to us all the sooner."

The negro did not let the invitation be repeated, and began vigorously attacking the provisions which Tranquil had put aside, and which Loyal Heart now spread on the ground. The hunters were eager to hear the news of which Quoniam stated himself to be the bearer; after all they had been able to see during the past few days, they must possess considerable importance. Still, however great their curiosity might be, they succeeded in hiding it, and patiently waited till the negro had finished his meal. The latter, who suspected what thoughts were crossing their minds, did not put their patience to a long trial; he ate with the proverbial rapidity of hunters, and had finished in a twinkling.

"Now I am quite at your service," he said, as he wiped his mouth on the skirt of his hunting-shirt, "and ready to answer all your questions."

"We have none to ask you," Tranquil said; "we wish you, gossip, to give us a short narrative of all that has happened to you."

"Well, it is not a long ride from here to the Larch-tree hacienda in a straight line; my horse is good; I went straight ahead, and covered the distance in eight hours. When I reached the Larch-tree, there was a great confusion at the hacienda. The peons and vaqueros collected in the patio were talking and shouting all together, while the Signor Hacendero, pale and alarmed, was distributing arms, raising barricades before the gates, placing cannon on their carriages—in short, taking all the precautions of men who expect an attack at any moment. It was impossible for me to make myself heard at first, for everybody was speaking at once—women crying, children screaming, and men swearing. I might have fancied myself in a mad-house, so noisy and terrified

did I find everybody; at length, however, by going from one to the other, questioning this man, and bullying that one, I learned the following, which enabled me to comprehend the general terror; the affair, I swear to you, was worth the trouble."

"Out with it, friend," Loyal Heart exclaimed.

"Let him tell his story in his own way," he said to Loyal Heart; "if not, it will be impossible for him to reach the end. Quoniam has a way of telling things peculiar to himself; if interrupted, he loses the thread of his ideas, and then he grows confused."

"That is true," said the negro; "when I am stopped, it is all up with me, and I get into such a tangle that I cannot find my way out. But to continue: this is what I learned:—The *conducta de plata*, escorted by Captain Melendez, was attacked by the Border Rifles, or the Freebooters as they are now called, and after a desperate fight, all the Mexicans were killed."

"Ah!" Tranquil exclaimed, in stupor.

"All," Quoniam repeated; "not one escaped; it must have been a frightful butchery."

"Speak lower, my friend," the hunter remarked, "Carmela might hear you."

The negro gave a nod of assent.

"But," he continued, in a lower key, "this victory was not very productive, for the Mexicans had been careful to hurl the gold they carried into a barranca."

"Well played, by Heaven!" the Canadian exclaimed; "but go on, my friend."

"This victory fired the mine; the whole of Texas has risen; the towns and pueblos are in full revolt, and the Mexicans are pursued like wild beasts."

"Is it so serious as that?"

"Much more than you suppose. The Jaguar is at this moment at the head of an army; he has hoisted the flag of Texan independence, and sworn that he will not lay down arms till he has restored liberty to his country."

"Is that all?" Tranquil asked.

"Not all," Quoniam made answer. "Considering that you would not be sorry to hear these important news as speedily as possible, I hastened to finish my business with the Capataz. I had some difficulty in finding him, as he was so busy; so soon as I got hold of him, instead of giving me the money I asked him for, he answered me that I must be off at once, and tell you to come to the hacienda as soon as you could."

"Hum!" said Tranquil.

"Seeing," Quoniam went on, "that there was nothing more to expect of the Capataz, I took leave of him and remounted my horse; but just as I was leaving, a great noise was heard outside, and everybody rushed to the gates, uttering shouts of joy. It seems that General Don José Maria Rubio, who commands the province, considers that the position of the hacienda is a very important point to defend."

"Of course," Tranquil said; "the Larch-tree commands the entrance of the valley, and, built at the period of the conquest, is a perfect fortress; its thick, battlemented walls, its situation on an elevation which cannot be commanded, and which on one side holds under its guns the mountain passes, and on the other the valley de los Almendrales, render it a point of the utmost importance, which can only be carried by a regular siege."

"That is what everybody said down there; it seems, too, that such is General Rubio's opinion, for the cause of all the disturbance I heard was the arrival of a large body of troops commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel, who had orders to shut himself up in the hacienda, and defend it to the last extremity."

"Civil war, then," Tranquil continued, mournfully, "that is to say, the most odious and horrible of all; a war in which fathers fight against sons, brothers against brothers, in which friend and foe speak the same tongue, issue from the same stem, have the same blood in their veins, and through that very reason are the more inveterate and rend each other with greater animosity and rage; civil war, the most horrible scourge that can crush a people! May God grant in his mercy that it be short."

"Amen!" his hearers replied, in a deep voice.

"But how did you succeed in escaping from the hacienda after the arrival of the troops, Quoniam?" Tranquil continued.

"I saw that, if I amused myself by admiring the uniform and fine appearance of the troops, when order was slightly restored, the gates would be closed, and my hopes of escaping foiled for a long time. Without saying a word, I dismounted, and leading my horse by the bridle, glided through the mob so cleverly, that I at length found myself outside. I then leaped into the saddle, and pushed straight ahead. I was only just in time, I declare, for five minutes later all the gates were closed."

"And then you came straight here?"

"You are mistaken; I did not return straight here: and yet it was not my inclination that prevented it, I assure you."

"What happened, then?"

"You will see, for I have not finished yet. Every man does what he can, and you have no right to ask more of him. Never," the negro continued, "did I gallop in such good spirits. My ride lasted, without interruption, for nearly five hours; at the end of that period I thought it advisable to grant my horse a few minutes' rest, that it might regain its breath. I therefore halted for two hours; then, after rubbing it down, I started again, but had scarcely galloped an hour longer, ere I fell into a large party of horsemen, armed to the teeth, who suddenly emerged from a ravine, and surrounded me ere I had even time enough to notice them. The meeting was anything but agreeable—the more so, as they did not appear at all well disposed toward me; and I do not exactly know how I should have got out of the hobble, had not one of the men thought proper to recognize me, and burst out, 'Why, it is a friend; 'tis Quoniam, Tranquil's comrade!' I confess that this exclamation pleased me; a man may be brave, but there are circumstances in which he feels frightened, and this is what happened to me."

The hunters smiled at the negro's simple frankness, but were careful not to interrupt him.

"At once," he continued, "the manner of these men changed entirely; they became most polite and attentive. 'Lead him to the commandant,' said one of them; the others approved, and I gave in, because resistance would have been folly. I followed without any remark, the man who led me to their chief."

"The Jaguar," the hunter said.

"What!" the negro exclaimed, in amazement, "have you guessed it? Well! I swear to you that I did not suspect it in the least, and was greatly surprised at seeing him. It seems that he is going straight to the Larch-tree hacienda."

"Does he intend to lay siege to it?"

"That is his intention, I believe; but, although he is at the head of nearly twelve hundred determined bandits, I do not think his nails, and those of his comrades will be hard enough to dig a hole in such stout walls."

"Go on, my friend."

"Before sending me away, the Jaguar inquired after you and Dona Carmela with considerable interest. Then he wrote a few words on a piece of paper,

which he handed me, with a recommendation to be sure and give it you so soon as I rejoined you."

"Good heaven!" Tranquil exclaimed, "and you have delayed so long in executing your commission!"

"Was I not obliged to tell you first what happened? But here is the paper."

While saying this, Quoniam drew a paper from his pocket, and offered it to Tranquil, who almost tore it out of his hands. The negro, convinced that he had carried out his commission excellently, did not at all comprehend the hunter's impatience; he looked at him a moment with an air of amazement, then shrugged his shoulders almost imperceptibly, filled his pipe, and began smoking.

The hunter quickly unfolded the paper; he turned it over and over in his hands with an air of embarrassment, taking a side-glance every now and then at Loyal Heart, who had drawn a burning log from the fire, and now held it within reading distance, for night had completely set in.

"Well," said Loyal Heart with a smile, "what does your friend Jaguar write?"

"Hum!" said the hunter.

"Perhaps," the other continued, "it is so badly written that you cannot make out his scrawl. If you permit me, I will try."

The Canadian looked at him. The young man's face was calm; nothing evidenced that he had a thought of making fun of the hunter.

"Deuce take all false shame!" he said as he gave him the letter. "Why should I not confess that I cannot read? A man whose life has been spent in the desert ought not to fear confessing an ignorance which can have nothing dishonouring for him. Read, read, my lad, and let us know what our doubtful friend wishes."

And he took the log from the young man's hands.

Loyal Heart took a rapid glance at the paper. "The letter is laconic," he said, "but explicit. Listen:

"The Jaguar has kept his word. Of all the Mexicans who accompanied the conducta, only one is alive free and unwounded—Captain Don Juan Melendez de Gongora!"

"Well," Tranquil exclaimed, "people may say as they please, but the Jaguar is a fine fellow."

"Is he not, father?" a gentle voice murmured in his ear.

Tranquil started at this remark, and turned sharply round. Carmela was by his side, calm and smiling.

CHAPTER IX.

HOSPITALITY.

We have said that night had fallen for some time past, and it was quite dark under covert. In the black sky a chaos of clouds, laden with the electric fluid, rolled heavily along. Not a star glistened in the vault of heaven; an autumnal breeze whistled gustily through the trees, and at each blast covered the ground with a shower of dead leaves.

In the distance could be heard the dull and mournful appeals of the wild

beasts proceeding to the drinking-place, and the snapping bark of the coyotes, whose ardent eyes at intervals gleamed like incandescent coals amid the shrubs. At times lights flashed in the forest and ran along the fine marsh grass like will-o'-the-wisps. Large dried-up sumach trees stood at the corners of the clearing, in which the bivouac was established, and in the fantastic gleams of the fire waved like phantoms their winding sheets of moss and lianas. A thousand sounds passed through the air; nameless cries escaped from invisible lairs, hollowed beneath the roots of the aged trees; stifled cries descended from the crests of the quebradas, and our adventurers felt an unknown world living around them, whose proximity froze the soul with a secret terror.

The news brought by Quoniam had augmented the tendency of the hunters to melancholy; hence the conversation round the fire, ordinarily gay and careless, was sad and short. Every one yielded to the flood of gloomy thoughts that contracted his heart, and the few words exchanged at lengthened intervals between the hunters generally remain unanswered.

Carmela alone, lively as a nightingale, continued in a low voice her conversation with Singing-bird, while warming herself, for the night was cold, and not noticing the anxious side-glances which the Canadian at times gave her. At the moment when Lanzi and Quoniam were preparing to go to sleep, a slight crackling was heard in the shrubs. The hunters, suddenly torn from their secret thoughts, raised their heads quickly. The horses had stopped eating, and with their heads turned to the thicket, and ears laid back, appeared to be listening.

"Some one is prowling around," said Loyal Heart.

"A spy, of course," replied Lanzi.

"Spy or no, the man is certainly a white," said Tranquil, as he stretched out his arm to clutch his rifle.

"Stay, father," Carmela said eagerly, "perhaps it is some poor wretch lost in the desert who needs help."

"It may be so," Tranquil replied after a moment's reflection; "at any rate, we shall soon know."

"What do you intend doing?" the girl exclaimed.

"Go and meet the man, and ask him what he wants."

"Take care, father."

"Of what, my child?"

"Suppose this man were one of the bandits, and he were to kill you?"

The Canadian shrugged his shoulders.

"Kill me, girl, nonsense! reassure yourself, my child, whoever the man may be, he will not see me unless I deem it necessary. So let me alone."

Freeing himself gently from Carmela's affectionate clutch, the Canadian picked up his rifle and disappeared in the chapparal with so light and well-measured a step, that he seemed rather to be gliding on a cloud, than walking on the grass of the clearing.

So soon as he reached the centre of the thicket, from which the ill-omened sound he had heard came, the hunter, ignorant as he was as to how many enemies he had to deal with, redoubled his prudence and precautions; after an hesitation which lasted only a few seconds, he lay down on the ground, and began gently crawling through the grass.

We must now return to the monk, whom we left proceeding toward the hunters' bivouac. When he was alone, Fray Ambrosio took a timid glance around him; his mind was perplexed, for he could not conceal from himself how delicate and difficult of accomplishment was the mission with which the chief had entrusted him, especially when dealing with a man so clever and well versed in Indian tricks as the tiger-killer.

Fortunately for himself, the monk belonged to that privileged class of men whom even the greatest annoyances but slightly affect, and who, after feeling wretched for a few moments, frankly make up their minds, saying to themselves that when the moment arrives in which they run a risk, an accident will perhaps draw them from their trouble, and turn matters to their advantage, in lieu of crushing them.

The monk, therefore, resolutely entered the covert, guiding himself by the light of the fire as a beacon. For some minutes he went on at a tolerable pace, but gradually as he approached, his alarm returned; he remembered the rough correction Captain Melendes had administered to him, and this time he feared even worse.

Still, he was now so near the bivouac that any backsliding would be useless. For the purpose of granting himself a few minutes' further respite, he dismounted, and fastened his horse to a tree with extreme slowness; then, having no further plausible pretext to offer himself for delaying his arrival among the hunters, he decided on starting again, employing the most minute precautions not to be perceived too soon, through fear of receiving a bullet in his chest.

But Fray Ambrosio, unluckily for himself, was extremely obese; he walked heavily, and like a man accustomed to tread the pavement of a town; moreover, the night was extremely dark, which prevented him seeing two yards ahead, and he could only progress with outstretched hands, tottering at every step, and running against every obstacle that came across his path.

Hence he did not go far, ere he aroused the persons he desired so much to surprise, and whose practised ear, constantly on the watch, had at once noticed the unusual sound which he had himself not noticed. Fray Antonio, extremely satisfied with his manner of progression, and congratulating himself in his heart at having succeeded so well in concealing himself, grew bolder and bolder, and began to feel almost entirely reassured, when suddenly he uttered a slight cry of terror, and stopped as if his feet had been rooted in the ground. He had felt a heavy hand laid on his shoulder.

The monk began trembling all over, though not daring to turn his head to the right or left, for he was persuaded in his heart that his last hour had arrived.

"Hilloh, *Senor Padre*, what are you doing in the forest at such an hour?" a hoarse voice then said to him.

But Fray Antonio was unable to answer; terror had rendered him deaf and blind.

"Are you dumb?" the voice went on a minute after in a friendly voice. "Come, come, it is not wise to traverse the desert at so late an hour."

The monk did not reply.

"Deuce take me," the other exclaimed, "if terror has not rendered him idiotic. Come, bestir yourself."

And he began shaking him vigorously.

"Eh, what?" the monk said.

"Come, there is some progress, you speak, hence you are not dead," Tranquil went on joyously, for it was he who had so cruelly frightened the monk; "follow me, you must be frozen, don't let us remain here."

And passing his arm through the monk's he led him away. In a few minutes they reached the clearing.

"Ah!" Carmela exclaimed in surprise; "Fray Antonio! by what accident is he here, when he started with the *conducta de plata*?"

This remark made the hunter prick up his ears; he examined the monk attentively, and then compelled him to sit down by the fire.

"I trust that the good father will explain to us what has happened to him," he muttered.

Everything, however, has an end in this world ; and the monk for some time past had seemed destined to pass, with the greatest rapidity and almost without transition, from the extremest terror to the most complete security. When he was a little warmed, the confusion produced in his ideas by the sudden meeting with the hunter gradually yielded to the cordial reception given him ; and Carmela's gentle voice breaking pleasantly on his ear, completely re-established the balance of his mind, and dismissed the mournful apprehensions that torment him.

"Do you feel better, holy Father?" Carmela asked him, with much sympathy.

"Yes," he said, "I thank you."

"Will you eat? Would you like to take any refreshment?"

"Nothing at all, I thank you, for I have not the least appetite."

"Perhaps you are thirsty, Fray Antonio ; if so, here is a bota of refino," said Lanzi, as he offered him a skin.

The monk, seizing the bota, drank a hearty draught of the generous fluid. This libation restored him all his coolness and presence of mind.

"There," he said, as he turned the bota to the half-breed, and gave vent to a sigh of relief, "heaven preserve me ; were the Evil One to come now in person, I feel capable of holding my own against him."

"Ah, ah!" said Tranquil, "it seems you are now completely restored to your intellectual faculties."

"Yes, and I will give you proof of it."

"You challenge me. I did not like to question you before ; but, as it is so, I will no longer hesitate."

"What do you wish to know?"

"A very simple matter : how is it that a monk finds himself at such an hour alone in the desert?"

"Nonsense," Fray Antonio said, gaily. "Who told you that I was alone?"

"Nobody ; but I suppose so."

"Do not make any suppositions, brother, for you would be mistaken."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, as I have the honour of telling you."

"Still, when I met you, you were alone."

"Granted."

"Well?"

"The others were further off, that's all."

"What others?"

"The persons who accompanied me."

"Ah! and who are they?"

"That is the question," he said, a minute after, as if holding a conversation with himself, "the most disadvantageous reports are current about me. I am accused of a number of bad actions ; suppose I were to try and do a good one. Who knows whether I may not be rewarded at a later date? At any rate, here goes."

Tranquil and his comrades listened in surprise to the monologue of the monk, not knowing exactly what to think of this man, and half inclined to deem him mad. The latter perceived the impression he produced.

"Listen," he said, with a slight frown ; "form what opinion of me you like, that is a matter of indifference to me ; still I do not wish it to be said that I requited your cordial hospitality by odious treachery."

"What do you mean?" Tranquil exclaimed.

"Listen to me. I uttered the word treachery, and perhaps I was wrong, for nothing proves to me that it is so."

"Explain yourself, in heaven's name; you speak in enigmas, and it is impossible to understand you."

"You are right, so I will be clear: which of you gentlemen bears the name of Tranquil?"

"It is I."

"Very good. Owing to certain circumstances, the recital of which would not at all interest you, I unluckily fell into the hands of the Apaches."

"Apaches!" Tranquil exclaimed, in surprise.

"Good Lord, yes," the monk continued; "and I assure you that when I found myself in their power, I did not feel at all comfortable. Still, far from inventing for me one of those atrocious tortures which they mercilessly inflict on the whites who are so unhappy as to become their prisoners, they treated me, on the contrary, with extreme gentleness."

Tranquil fixed a scrutinising glance on the monk's placid face.

"For what purpose did they that?" he asked.

"That I could not comprehend, though I am perhaps beginning to suspect it."

The hearers bent toward the speaker with an expression of impatient curiosity.

"This evening," the monk went on, "the chief of the redskins accompanied me to within a short distance of your bivouac; on coming in sight of your fire he pointed it out to me, saying, 'Go and sit down at that brasero. You will tell the great pale hunter that one of his oldest and dearest friends desires to see him.' Then he left me, after making the most horrible threats if I did not obey him at once. You know the rest."

Tranquil and his comrades regarded each other in amazement, but without exchanging a word. There was a rather long silence; but Tranquil at length took on himself to express aloud the thought each had in his heart.

"'Tis a trap," he said.

"Yes," Loyal Heart remarked; "but for what purpose?"

"How do I know?" the Canadian muttered.

"You said, Fray Antonio," the young man continued, addressing the monk, "that you suspected the motives of the Apaches' extraordinary treatment of you?"

"I did say so," he replied.

"Let us know that suspicion."

"It was suggested to me by the conduct of the pagans, and by the clumsy snare they laid for you; it is evident to me that the Apache chief hopes, if you consent to grant the interview he asks, to profit by your absence to carry off Dona Carmela."

"Carry me off!" the maiden exclaimed, with a start of horror.

"The redskins are very fond of white women," the monk continued, coolly; "most of the incursions they make into our territory are undertaken for purpose of carrying off captives of that colour."

"Oh!" Carmela exclaimed, "I would sooner die than become the slave of one of those demons."

Tranquil shook his head sadly. "The monk's supposition appears to me correct," he said.

"The more so," Fray Antonio confirmed him, "because the Apaches who made me prisoner are the same that attacked the Venta del Potrero."

"Oh, oh!" said Lanzi; "in that case I know their chief, and his name; he is one of the most implacable enemies of the white men. It is very unlucky that I did not succeed in burying him under the ruins of the venta."

"What is the fellow's name?" the hunter asked, sharply, evidently annoyed at his verbiage.

"Blue-fox!" said Lanzi.

"Ah!" Tranquil said, ironically, and with a dark frown, "I have known Blue-fox for many years, and you, chief?" he added, turning to Black-deer.

The name of the Apache Sachem had produced such an impression on the Pawnee, that the hunter was startled by it.

"Blue-fox is a dog, the son of a coyote," he said, as he spate on the ground disdainfully; "the gipaetes would refuse to devour his unclean carcase."

"These two men must have a mortal hatred for each other," the Canadian muttered, as he took a side glance at the inflamed features and sparkling eyes of the chief.

"Will my brother kill Blue-fox?" the Pawnee asked.

"It is probable," Tranquil answered; "but in the first place, let us try to play this rogue a trick. Be frank, monk; have you told us the truth?"

"On my honour."

"I should prefer any other oath," the Canadian said ironically, in a low voice.

"Can you be trusted?"

"Yes."

"Is what you said to us about your return to honest courses sincere? Do you really intend to be of service to us?"

"I do."

"Whatever may happen?"

"Whatever may happen, and whatever the consequence may be of what you ask of me?"

"That will do. I warn you that, in all probability, you will be exposed to serious perils."

"I have told you that my resolution is formed; speak, therefore, without further hesitation."

"Listen to me, then."

CHAPTER X.

THE LARCH-TREE HACIENDA.

THOUGH the report made by Quoniam was in every respect true, the negro was ignorant of certain details of which we will now inform the reader, because these events are closely connected with our story, and clearness renders it indispensable that they should be made known. We will, therefore, return to the larch-tree hacienda.

This building, but a short distance from the mountains whose passes it commanded, was of great strategical value to both the parties now disputing the possession of Texas. The insurgent chiefs understood this as well as the Mexican generals did.

After the total destruction of the detachment commanded by Captain Melendez, General Rubio hastened to throw a powerful garrison into the Larch-tree.

He was aware that the inhabitants only awaited the announcement of a success, even though problematical, to rise to a man, and make common cause with the daring partizans, branded by their enemies with the name of Border ruffians, but who in reality were only the forlorn hope of a revolution, and apostles acting under a holy and noble idea.

"You have your revenge to take, Colonel Melendez," he said to the young officer; "your new epaulettes have not yet smelt powder. I propose giving you a splendid opportunity for christening them."

"You will fulfil my wishes, General," the young officer replied, "by entrusting me with a perilous enterprise, my success in which will serve to wipe out the shame of my defeat."

"There is no shame, Colonel," the General replied, kindly, "in being conquered as you were. Let us not despond at an insignificant check, but try to cut the comb of these cocks who, pluming themselves on their ephemeral triumph, doubtless imagine that we are terrified and demoralised by their victory."

"Be assured, General, that I will help you to the best of my ability. Whatever be the post you confide to me, I will die at it before surrendering."

"An officer, my friend, must put off that impetuosity which so well becomes the soldier. Do not forget that you are a head, and not an arm."

"I will be prudent, General, as far as the care for my honour will permit me."

"That will do, Colonel—I ask no more."

Don Juan merely bowed in response.

"By-the-bye," said the General, presently, "have these partizans any capable men at their head?"

"Very capable; thoroughly acquainted with guerilla fighting, and possessing both bravery and coolness."

"All the better, for in that case we shall reap more glory in conquering them. Unfortunately, they are said to wage war like perfect savages, pitilessly massacring the soldiers that fall into their hands."

"You are mistaken, General. Whatever these men may be, and the cause for which they fight, it is my duty to disabuse you on this point, for they have been strangely calumniated; it was only after my repeated refusals to surrender that the action began. Their Chief even offered me my life at the moment when I hurled myself with him into the yawning abyss at our feet. When I became their prisoner they restored my sword, gave me a horse and a guide, who brought me within musket-shot of your outposts: is that the conduct of cruel men?"

"Certainly not, and I am pleased to see you thus do justice to your enemies."

"I merely declare a fact."

"Yes, and an unlucky one for us; these men must consider themselves very strong to act thus. This clemency of theirs will attract a great number of partizans."

"I fear it."

"And I too. No matter, the moment has arrived to act with vigour."

"I await your orders, General."

"Very good. I have prepared three hundred men, cavalry and infantry; the latter will mount behind the horsemen, for the march must be rapid, as my object is that you should reach the hacienda before the insurgents, and fortify yourself."

"I will reach it."

"I count on you. Two mountain guns will follow your detachment, and will

prove sufficient; for, if I am rightly informed, the hacienda has six in good condition. Still, as ammunition may run short, you will take sufficient with you to last for a fortnight. At all risks, the hacienda must hold out for that period."

The General now walked to the entrance of the tent and raised the curtain.

"Summon the officers told off for the expedition," he said.

Five minutes later the officers appeared; nine in number—two captains of cavalry, two of infantry, two lieutenants, and two alferes or second lieutenants, and a captain, lieutenant, and alferes of artillery. The General looked for a moment searchingly at these men, who stood serious and motionless before him.

"Caballeros," he at length said, "I have carefully chosen you from the officers of my army, because I know that you are brave and experienced; you are about to carry out, under Colonel Don Juan Melendez de Gongora, a confidential mission, which I would not have given to others whose devotion to their country was less known to me. This mission is most perilous. I hope that you will accomplish it like brave men, and return here with glory."

The officers bowed their thanks.

"Do not forget," the General continued, "that you owe your soldiers an example of subordination and discipline; obey the Colonel as myself in all he may order for the good of the service."

"We cannot desire a better Chief than the one your Excellency has selected to lead us," one of the Captains answered.

The General smiled graciously.

"I count on your zeal and bravery. Now, to horse without further delay, for you must have left the camp within ten minutes."

The officers bowed and retired. Don Juan prepared to follow them.

"Stay," the General said to him; "I have one final recommendation to give you."

The young man walked up to him.

"Shut yourself up in the place," the General went on. "If you are invested, do not attempt any of those sallies, which often compromise the fate of a garrison, without advantage. Content yourself with vigorously repulsing attacks, sparing the blood of your soldiers, and not expending your ammunition needlessly. You *must* resist till then. I will march in person to your help at any cost."

"I have already told you I will do so, General."

"I know that you will. Now, my friend, to horse, and may you be more fortunate."

"Thanks, General."

The Colonel bowed, and immediately withdrew to place himself at the head of the small band which, collected a short distance off, only awaited his arrival to start. The General was standing in the doorway of his tent to witness their departure. Don Juan mounted, and turned towards the motionless detachment.

"Forward!" he commanded.

The squadrons at once started. The General remained in the doorway of his tent for some time, and when the last sound had died away, he pensively re-entered the tent, and let the curtain fall behind him, muttering in a low and sad voice—

"I have sent them to death, for Heaven fights on the side of our adversaries."

Meanwhile, the detachment rapidly continued its march. Thanks to the Mexican fashion of mounting infantry *en croupe*, the troops carried out their

movements with a rapidity that seemed almost prodigious, the more so as American horses go very quickly, and endure great fatigue without injury.

The Americans of the South are generally very harsh to their horses. Never inland does a horse pass the night, whatever the weather may be, otherwise than in the open air. Every morning it receives its ration for the whole day, marching frequently fourteen, or even sixteen hours, without stopping or drinking; when evening arrives, the harness is removed, and it is left to find its food where it can. On the Indian border, where there is much to fear from the Redskins, who are great admirers of horses, and display admirable skill in stealing them, certain precautions are used at night; the horses are picquetted in the interior of the bivouac, and feed on the pea-vines, the young tree-shoots, and a few measures of maize or other corn, which is given with extreme parsimony. Still, these horses are very handsome, vigorous, remarkably docile, and of great speed.

Colonel Melendez arrived at an early hour in sight of the hacienda, for his troops had made a forced march through the night. With a rapid glance the experienced chief of the Mexicans examined the neighbourhood, but the plain was deserted.

The Larch-tree hacienda stood like an eagle's nest on the top of a hillock, whose abrupt sides had never been smoothed, as the steepness of their ascent was regarded as a means of defence in the event of an attack. Thick walls turned yellow by time, at each angle of which could be seen the threatening muzzles of two guns peering out, gave this strongly-built house the appearance of a real fortress.

The Mexicans increased their already rapid pace, in order to reach the hacienda before the gates were opened, and the ganado let out. When they did, the gates were not opened till the inhabitants were well assured that the new comers were really friends. They had already heard of the general insurrection occasioned by the surprise of the *conducta de plata*, and hence the major-domo, who commanded in the absence of Don Felipe de Valreal, proprietor of the hacienda, kept on his guard.

This major-domo, whose name was Don Felix Paz, was a man of about five-and-forty at the most, tall, well-built, and powerful; he had, in truth, the appearance of a perfect *hombre de caballo*, an essential condition for fulfilling his onerous duties. This major-domo came in person to receive the Mexican detachment at the gate of the hacienda. After congratulating the colonel, he informed him that so soon as he received the news of the general revolt of the province, he had brought all his cattle in, armed the servants, and rendered the guns on the platform serviceable.

The colonel complimented him on his diligence, established his troops in the outhouses destined for the peons and vaqueros, took military possession of all the posts, and, accompanied by the major-domo, made a strict inspection of the interior of the fortress. Don Juan Melendez, being well acquainted with the carelessness and sloth of his fellow countrymen, expected to find the hacienda in a wretched state, but was agreeably deceived.

Indeed, the colonel found but very little to alter in the arrangements made by the major-domo; he contented himself with cutting down several clumps of trees which, being situated too near the hacienda, might shelter sharp-shooters, who could annoy their artillerymen. At each entrance of the hacienda barricades were erected by his orders, composed of branches interlaced, and outside the walls the arms of all the healthy men were called into requisition, to dig a deep and wide trench, the earth from which, thrown up on the side of the hacienda, formed a breast-work, behind which the best shots in the garrison

were placed. The two guns brought by the colonel remained horsed, so that they might be transported to the point of danger. Finally, the Mexican flag was hoisted on the top of the hacienda.

Counting the servants, to whom Don Felix had distributed arms, the garrison amounted to nearly four hundred men, a sufficient force to resist a coup de main, especially in so good a position as this; there was plenty of ammunition and food.

The works of fortification were carried on with such great activity, that they were completed within twenty-four hours of the colonel's arrival at the hacienda. The scouts, sent out in all directions, came back without any fresh news of the insurgents, whose movements were so cleverly veiled, that, since the affair of the conducta, they seemed to have disappeared without leaving a trace.

It was the second day after the arrival of the Mexicans at the Larch-tree; the sun was disappearing behind the mountains in masses of gold; night would soon set in. Colonel Melendez and the major-domo, leaning on one of the battlements of the platform, were absently gazing out on the immense landscape unrolled at their feet, while conversing together. Don Juan had in a few minutes appreciated the loyalty and intelligence of the major-domo; hence these two men, who thoroughly understood each other, had become friends.

"Another day past," said the colonel, "and it has been impossible for us yet to learn the movements of the insurgents. Does not that appear extraordinary?"

The major-domo sent forth a cloud of smoke from his mouth and nostril, took his husk cigarette from his mouth, and quietly flipped away the ash.

"Very extraordinary," he said.

"What a singular man you are! nothing disturbs you," Don Juan went on. "Have our scouts returned?"

"All."

"And still brought no news?"

"None."

"By Heaven! your coolness would make a saint swear! Why are you looking so fixedly at the sky? do you fancy you can find information there?"

"Perhaps so. Look there," the major-domo replied, extending his hand in a north-east direction.

"Well?" the colonel said, looking in the direction indicated.

"Do you see nothing?"

"On my honour, no."

"Not even those flocks of herons and flamingos flying in large circles, and uttering shrill cries?"

"Certainly I see birds; but what have they in common——?"

"Colonel," the major-domo interrupted him, "prepare to defend yourself; the enemy is there."

"What—the enemy? you are mad, Don Felix; look out in the last gleams of day, the plain is deserted."

"Colonel, before becoming major-domo at the Larch-tree hacienda, I was a wood-ranger for fifteen years; the desert is to me a book, every page of which I can peruse. Watch the timid flight of those birds, notice the numberless flocks which are constantly joining those we first perceived; those birds, driven from their nests, are flying hap-hazard before an enemy who will soon appear. That enemy is the insurgent army."

"Rayo de Dios, Don Felix," the colonel suddenly exclaimed; "you are right, look there!"

A red line, momentarily growing wider suddenly appeared on the extreme verge of the horizon.

"Did the flight of the birds deceive us?" the major-domo asked.

"Forgive me, friend, a very excusable ignorance; but we have not a moment to lose."

They went down at once; five minutes later the defenders of the hacienda lined the tops of the walls, and ambushed themselves behind the exterior intrenchments. The Texan army, now perfectly visible, was deploying on the plains in heavy columns.

CHAPTER XI.

▲ METAMORPHOSIS.

WE must now go back to the encampment of the hunters, whom we left in a most awkward position, watched by the vigilant eye of the Apaches, and compelled to trust to Fray Antonio, that is to say, to a man for whom, in his heart, not one of them felt the slightest sympathy. Still, had it been possible to read the monk's mind, their opinion about him would probably have been completely changed.

But a revolution had taken place in this man's mind, and he had been unconsciously overcome by that influence which upright natures ever exert over those which have not yet been entirely spoiled. However, whatever was the cause of the change which had taken place almost suddenly in the monk's ideas, we are bound to state that it was sincere, and that Fray Antonio really intended to serve his new friends.

Tranquil, accustomed, through the desert life he led, to discover with a certain degree of skill the true feelings of persons with whom accident brought him in contact, thought it his duty to appear to trust, under present circumstances, entirely to the monk.

"Are you brave?" he asked him.

Fray Antonio, surprised by the sudden question, hesitated for a moment.

"That depends," he said.

"Good; that is a sensible answer. There are moments when no man can answer for his courage."

The monk gave a sign of assent.

"We have," Tranquil continued, "to cheat the cheater, and play at diamond cut diamond with him; you must return to Blue-fox."

"What?"

"Are you afraid?"

"Not exactly; but I fancy he may proceed to extremities with me. But I will run the risk."

The Canadian looked fixedly at him.

"That will do," he said to him. "Here, take these, and, at any rate, if you are attacked, you will not die unavenged."

And he put a brace of pistols in his hand. The monk examined them attentively for a moment, then he hid them under his gown with a start of joy.

"I fear nothing now," he said; "I am going."

"Still I must explain to you——"

"For what good purpose?" the monk interrupted him. "I will tell Blue-fox that you consent to have an interview with him; but, as you do not care to go alone to his camp, you prefer seeing him without witnesses in the middle of the prairie."

That will do, and you will bring him with you to the spot where I shall be waiting. Now, one parting hint. Keep a few paces from the chief, not before or behind, but on his right hand, if possible."

"Very good; I understand."

"Well, I trust you will succeed."

"Oh, now I fear nothing, as I am armed."

After uttering these words, the monk rose and walked away with a quick and firm step. The Canadian looked after him for some time.

"What is your plan?" asked Loyal Heart.

"It is simple: we can only triumph over the enemies who surround us by stratagem; hence, that is the only thing I intend employing. We must escape from these red demons at all hazards."

"That is true. But, when we have succeeded in throwing them out, where shall we go?"

"We must not dream, in the present excited state of the country, of making a long journey across the desert with two females; it would be running certain ruin."

"That is true; but what can we do?"

"It is my intention to proceed to the Larch-tree hacienda. There, I fancy, my daughter will obtain the best protection for the present."

"Permit me to remind you that yourself refused to have recourse to that."

"That is true; hence I only resolve on it when in a fix. As for you——"

"Oh, I will accompany you," said Loyal Heart.

"Thanks," the Canadian exclaimed, warmly. "Still, in spite of all the pleasure your generous offer occasions me, I cannot accept it."

"Why not?"

"Because the nation which had adopted you claims your help, and you cannot refuse it."

"It will wait; besides, Black-deer will make my excuses."

"No," the chief said, distinctly; "I will not leave my pale friends in danger."

"By Jove!" Tranquil exclaimed, "as it is so we shall have some fun; hang it all, if five resolute and well-armed men cannot get the best of a hundred Apaches. Listen to me, comrades: while I go ostensibly to the meeting I have granted Blue-fox, follow me in Indian file, and be ready to appear directly I give you the signal by imitating the cry of the mocking bird."

"All right."

"You, Lanzi and Quoniam, will watch over Carmela."

"We will all watch over her, friend, trust to us," said Loyal Heart.

Tranquil gave his comrades a parting farewell, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and left the encampment. He had hardly disappeared ere the hunters lay down on the ground and crawled on his trail, Carmela guided by Singing-bird forming the rear guard. The maiden felt an involuntary shudder run over her limbs as she entered the forest. This night march, whose issue might prove so fatal, terrified her.

Fray Antonio had gone hardly five hundred yards from the forest when a man suddenly emerged from a thicket and barred his passage. The monk suppressed with difficulty a cry of terror at this unexpected apparition, and started back. But immediately regaining his coolness, he prepared to sustain the terrible

contest that doubtless menaced him, for he had recognised Blue-fox at the first glance. The chief examined him in silence, fixing on him his deep black eye with an expression of suspicion which did not escape the monk.

"My father has been a long time," he at length said.

"I could not be any quicker," the monk answered.

"Wah! my father returns alone; the great pale warrior was afraid; he did not accompany my father."

"You are mistaken, chief; the man you call the great pale hunter, and whom I call Tranquil, was not afraid, and did not refuse to accompany me."

"Och! Blue-fox is a sachem; his eye pierces the darkness; though he may look he sees nothing."

"That is probably because you do not look in the right direction, that's all."

"Blue-fox desires to know how his pale friend carried out the mission the sachem confided to him."

"I took the best advantage possible of my meeting with the hunter, in order to carry out your orders."

"My father will pardon me, I am only a poor Indian without brains. Will the great pale hunter come?"

"I left him over there, at the verge of the forest. He is waiting for the chief."

Blue-fox started, and fixing on the monk a glance which seemed trying to read his most secret thoughts.

"Why did he not accompany my father here?" he said.

The monk assumed the most simple look possible.

"On my faith, I do not know," he answered; "but of what consequence is it?"

"It is pleasanter to converse on the prairie."

"Do you think so? Well, it is possible. For my own part I do not see any difference between here and there."

In spite of his craft the chief was deceived.

"Has the great pale hunter come alone?"

"No," Fray Antonio replied, boldly.

"If that be so, Blue-fox will not go."

"The chief will reflect."

"What is the use of reflecting? The father has deceived his red friend."

"The hunter could not come alone."

"Why not?"

"Because he did not wish to leave in the forest the girl who accompanies him."

The Indian's face suddenly brightened, and assumed an expression of extraordinary cunning.

"Wah!" he said, "and no other person but the young pale virgin accompanies the hunter?"

"No, it seems that the other white warriors who were with him left him at daybreak."

"Does my father know where they are gone?"

"I did not inquire. That does not concern me."

"My father is a wise man."

These words were rapidly exchanged between the two men. Fray Antonio had answered so naturally, and with such well-played frankness, that the Indian, whose secret thoughts the Mexican's answers flattered, felt all his suspicions vanish.

"Och!" he said, "Blue-fox will see his friend."

"The father can return to the camp."

"No, thank you, chief," the monk answered, "I prefer remaining with people of my own colour."

Blue-fox reflected for an instant, and then replied, with an ironical smile playing round his thin lips—

"Good; my father is right. He can follow me, then."

"It is evident," the monk thought to himself, "that this accursed pagan is devising some treachery. But I will watch him, and at the slightest suspicious movement I will blow out his brains like the dog he is."

But he kept these reflections to himself, and followed the chief with an easy and perfectly indifferent air. In the moonbeams, which allowed objects to be distinguished for a considerable distance, they soon perceived on the extreme verge of the forest the dark outline of a man leaning on a rifle.

Blue-fox, though he placed confidence in his companion, only advanced, however, with extreme caution and prudence, examining the shrubs and even the smallest tufts of grass, as if assuring himself that they concealed no enemy. But, with the exception of the man they perceived before them, the place seemed plunged in profound solitude; all was calm and motionless.

"Let us stop here," said Fray Antonio, "it would be imprudent for us to advance further without announcing ourselves, although the hunter has probably recognised us already."

"That is true; it is as well to be cautious."

They stopped at about twenty yards from the covert, where Fray Antonio placed his hands funnel-wise and shouted to the full extent of his lungs—

"Hilloh! Tranquil, is that you?"

"Who calls me?" the latter answered.

"I—Fray Antonio. I am accompanied by the person you are expecting."

"Advance," Tranquil replied. "Those who seek me with no thought of treachery have nothing to fear."

"What shall we do?" asked the monk.

"Go on," Blue-fox replied, laconically.

The distance which separated them from the hunter was soon covered; and the Mexican becoming an impromptu master of the ceremonies, presented the two men to each other. The sachem took a searching glance around him.

"I do not see the young pale girl," he said,

"Did you wish to speak to her or to me?" the Canadian answered, drily. "I am ready to listen to you."

The Indian frowned; his suspicions were returning; he gave a menacing glance at the monk, who, obeying the advice given him, had insensibly withdrawn a few steps and was preparing to be an apparently calm witness of the coming scene.

"I only wished to speak to my brother," he replied, in an insinuating voice; "Blue-fox has for many moons desired to see again the face of a friend."

"If it were really as the chief says," the hunter continued, "nothing could have been more easy. Many years have been swallowed up in the immense gulf of the past, since the period when, young and full of faith, I called Blue-fox my friend. At that period he had a Pawnee heart; but now that he has plucked it from his bosom, to exchange it for an Apache heart, I know him not."

"The great hunter of the pale-faces is severe," the Indian answered. "What matter the days that have passed, if the hunter finds again his friend of the olden time?"

"Am I an old woman, to be deceived by the smooth words of a forked tongue?" said the Canadian, as he shrugged his shoulders. "Blue-fox is dead; my eyes only see him as an Apache chief, that is an enemy."

"Let my brother remove the skin from his heart, he will recognise a friend," the Indian continued.

Tranquil felt impatient at such cynical impudence.

"A truce to fine speeches, whose sincerity I do not believe in," he said. "Was he my friend who a few days ago tried to carry off my daughter, and at the head of his warriors attacked the calli in which she dwelt, and which is now reduced to ashes?"

"My brother has heard the mocking-bird whisper in his ear, and put faith in its falsehoods.

"You are more chattering and lying than the mocker," Tranquil exclaimed, as he violently stamped the butt of his rifle on the ground. "For the last time I repeat to you I regard you not as a friend, but as an enemy. Now, we have nothing more to say to one another, so let us separate."

The Indian took a piercing glance around him, and his eye sparkled ferociously.

"We will not part thus," he said, as he walked two or three steps nearer the hunter, who still remained motionless, attentively following his every movement, while affecting the most perfect confidence.

As for Fray Antonio, he understood that the moment for acting vigorously was fast approaching, and while continuing to feign the most perfect indifference to the interview of which he was witness, he had quietly drawn the pistols from under his gown, and held them cocked in his hand. The situation was growing most awkward between the two speakers: each was preparing for the struggle, although their faces were still calm and their voices gentle.

"Yes," Tranquil continued, "we will part thus, chief, and may heaven grant that we may never find ourselves face to face again."

"But the hunter will answer one question."

"I will not, for this conversation has lasted too long."

And he fell back a pace. The sachem stretched forth his arm to stop him.

"I will not speak to a foe," the Canadian replied.

"Then die, miserable dog of a pale-face," the chief exclaimed, at length throwing off the mask and brandishing his tomahawk with extreme rapidity.

But at the same instant a man rose like a black phantom behind the Apache chief, threw his arms round his body, and lifting him with a wondrous strength, hurled him to the ground, and placed his knee on his chest, ere the sachem, surprised and alarmed by this sudden attack, had attempted to defend himself.

At the yell uttered by Blue-fox, some fifty Apache warriors appeared as if by enchantment, but almost at the same moment the hunter's comrades, who, although invisible, had attentively followed the incidents of this scene, stood by the Canadian's side. Fray Antonio at once brought down two Apaches with his pistols, and rejoined the whites.

Two groups of implacable enemies were thus opposed; unfortunately, the hunters were very weak against the numerous foes that surrounded them on all sides. Still their firm demeanour and flashing eyes evinced their unbending resolution to be killed sooner than surrender.

It was an imposing spectacle offered by this handful of men surrounded by implacable foes, and who yet seemed as calm as if they were peaceably seated round their camp-fire. Carmela and Singing-bird, suffering from sharp pangs of terror, pressed all in a tremor to the side of their friends.

Blue-fox still lay on the ground, held down by Black-deer, whose knee compressed his chest, and neutralised all the tremendous efforts he made to rise. The Apaches, with their long barbed arrows pointed at the hunters, only awaited

a word or a sign to begin the attack. A silence of death brooded over the prairie: it seemed as if these men, before tearing each other to pieces, were collecting all their strength to bound forward and rush on each other. Black-deer was the first to break the silence.

"Wah!" he shouted in a voice rendered hoarse with passion, as he brandished his scalping-knife over his enemy's head; "at length I meet thee, dog, thief, chicken-heart; I hold my vengeance in my hands; at last thy scalp will adorn my horse's mane."

"Thou art but a chattering old woman; thy insults cannot affect me, so try something else. Blue-fox laughs at thee; thou canst not compel him to utter a cry of pain or make a complaint."

"I will follow thy advice," Black-deer shouted, passionately, and seized his enemy's scalp-lock.

"Stop," the Canadian shouted, in a thundering voice, as he seized the arm of the vindictive chief. "Let that man rise."

Black-deer gave him a ferocious glance, but made no reply.

"It must be so," the hunter said.

The Comanche chief bent his head, restored his enemy to liberty, and fell back a pace. With one bound Blue-fox sprang up; but, instead of attempting flight, he crossed his arms on his chest, resuming that mask of impenetrable stoicism which Indians so rarely doff. Tranquil regarded him for a moment with a singular expression, and then said,—

"I was wrong just now, and my brother must pardon me. No, the memories of youth are not effaced like clouds which the wind bears away. When I saw the terrible danger that menaced Blue-fox, my heart was affected, and I remembered that we had been friends. I trembled to see his blood flow before me. Blue-fox is a great chief, he must die as a warrior in the sunshine, he is free to rejoin his friends."

The chief raised his head.

"On what conditions?" he said drily.

"On none. If the Apache warriors attack us, we will fight them; if not, we will continue our journey peacefully. The chief must decide."

Tranquil, in acting as he had done, had given a proof of the profound knowledge he possessed of the red-skin character, among whom any heroic action is immediately appreciated at its full value. It was a dangerous game to play, but the situation of the hunters was desperate, despite their courage; if the fight had begun, they must have been naturally crushed by numbers, and pitilessly massacred. For the success of his plan the Canadian could only calculate on a good feeling on the part of Blue-fox, and he staked his all.

After carefully listening to Tranquil's remarks, Blue-fox remained silent for some minutes, during which a violent combat went on in his heart; he felt he was the dupe of the snare into which he had tried to draw the hunter by reminding him of their old friendship; but the murmurs of admiration which his warriors were unable to suppress, on seeing the Canadian's noble deed, warned him that he must dissimulate.

The power of an Indian chief is always very precarious; and he is often constrained, in spite of himself, to bow before the demands of his subordinates, if he does not wish to be overthrown and have a new chief set up immediately in his place. Blue-fox, therefore, slowly drew his scalping-knife from his belt, and let it fall at the hunter's feet.

"The great white hunter and his brothers can continue to follow their path," he said; "the eyes of the Apache warriors are closed, they will not see them. The pale-faces can depart, they will find no one on their road till the second

moon from this ; but then they must take care ; an Apache chief will set himself on their trail, in order to ask back from them the knife he leaves them, and which he will require."

"When Blue-fox asks me for it, he will find it," said the Canadian, as he stooped down and picked up the knife.

"Och ! I will manage to take it again. Now, we are even. Farewell !"

The chief then bowed courteously to his enemies, made a prodigious bound back, and disappeared in the lofty grass. The Apache warriors uttered their war-yell twice, and almost immediately their black outlines disappeared in the gloom.

"Now, we will set out," said Tranquil, "the road is free."

"You got out of the scrape cleverly," Loyal Heart said to him ; "but it was a terrible risk."

The Canadian smiled, but made no further reply. Then they started.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SUMMONS.

EUROPEANS, accustomed to the gigantic wars of the Old World, have a difficulty in forming an idea of the way in which war is waged in certain parts of America.

Texas, at the period when it claimed its independence, in a contest of ten years, so obstinately, counted over its entire territory only a population of less than one hundred thousand—a very weak and modest amount, when compared with the seven millions of the Mexican confederation. But the Texan population was composed, in a great measure, of North Americans—energetic, enterprising men, of known courage, who, annoyed by the long-lasting tyranny the Federal government exercised over them, through jealousy and narrowness of views, had sworn to be free at any price, and took up arms in order to guarantee the possession of their estates, and their personal security.

The struggle had been going on for ten years ; at first timid and secret, it had gradually widened, holding in check the Mexican power, and at length attained that final and supreme period when the alternative is victory or death.

The surprise of the conducta, so skilfully managed by the Jaguar, had been the electric spark destined to definitely galvanise the country, and make it rise as one man for this modern Thermopylæ. The independent chiefs, who were fighting all along the border, had, at the unexpected news of the decisive success obtained by the Jaguar, assembled their *cuadrillas*, and, by common agreement, and through an heroic impulse, ranged themselves under the banners of the youthful chieftain, and pledged him obedience, in order to carry through the liberation of their country.

The Jaguar's army was composed of men hardened by lengthened fighting, who burned to cope with the Mexicans, and who, before all, wished to be free ! No more was needed for them to accomplish miracles. The Jaguar was thoroughly acquainted with the character of his soldiers ; he knew that he must only ask one thing of them—an impossibility—and this he had, consequently, determined to attempt.

Through the wish of the new commander-in-chief, all the captains of *cuadrillas* assembled in a council of war, in order to draw up a plan of campaign.

Each party gave his opinion. The debate was short, for all entertained the same idea—and that was, to seize on the Larch-tree hacienda, in order to cut off the communications of the Mexican army, prevent it from receiving reinforcements from the other states of the confederation, and, once masters of the fortress, to defeat in detail the different Mexican detachments scattered over Texan territory. As this plan was remarkably simple, the Jaguar resolved to carry it out immediately. After leaving a detachment of five hundred horsemen to cover his rear, and avoid any surprise, he advanced with his main body by forced marches on the Larch-tree, with the intention of investing and carrying it by assault ere the Mexicans had found time to put a garrison in it and throw up intrenchments.

Unfortunately, despite all the diligence the Jaguar had displayed in the execution of his plan, the Mexicans, owing to the lengthened experience and infallible glance of General Rubio, had been more prompt than he, and the place had been in a perfect state of defence two days ere the Texan army appeared at the foot of its walls.

This disappointment greatly annoyed the Jaguar, but did not discourage him; he saw that he would have to lay siege to the Larch-tree, and bravely made his preparations. The Americans dug up the soil with wondrous rapidity, and a night was sufficient for them to finish the preparatory works, and make breastworks and parapets. The Mexicans gave no signs of life, and allowed the insurgents to establish themselves in their lines without opposition; by sunrise all was finished.

It was a strange spectacle offered by this handful of men, who, without artillery or siege material of any description, boldly traced lines round a stoutly-built fortress, admirably situated for resistance, and defended by a numerous garrison, which was determined not to surrender. But what in this heroic madness produced admiration, and almost stupor, was the conviction these men had that they would eventually take the place.

As they arrived after sunset, when the night had all but set in, the Texans had formed an imperfect idea of the defenceless state of the place which they proposed to besiege; hence, when day broke, they eagerly proceeded to see what enemy they would have to deal with. The surprise was anything but agreeable to them, and they were compelled to confess to themselves in their hearts that the job would be a tough one. This surprise was changed almost into discouragement when the fortress hoisted the Mexican flag, saluting it with several rounds of grape-shot, which fell into the centre of the camp, and killed and wounded some fifteen men.

But this movement of weakness was but short; a reaction speedily took place, and it was with hurrahs and shouts of joy that they displayed the colours of Texan independence. For valid reasons they did not accompany the hoisting of their flag by cannon-shots, but they saluted it with salvos of musketry, whose well-sustained fire gave back to the besieged the death they had scattered through the camp.

The Jaguar, after examining the fortifications, resolved to proceed according to rule, and summon the place to surrender before beginning the siege. Consequently, he hoisted a white flag on the top of the intrenchments, and waited; a few moments later, a flag of the same colour appeared on the breastwork outside the place.

The Jaguar, preceded by a trumpeter, followed by two or three officers, left the camp and ascended the hill on which the hacienda was situated. A number of officers equal to his own had left the place and advanced to meet him. On arriving at about an equal distance from the two lines, the Jaguar halted, and in

a few minutes the Mexican officers, commanded by Don Felix Paz, joined him. After the usual compliments had been exchanged with extreme politeness, the major-domo asked—

"With whom have I the honour of speaking?"

"With the commander-in-chief of the Texan army."

"We do not recognise any Texan army," the major-domo said drily. "Texas forms an integral portion of Mexico."

"If you do not know the one I have the honour of commanding," the Jaguar said with a smile, "ere long, please Heaven, it will have made so much noise that you will be compelled to recognise it."

"That is possible; but for the present we do not know it."

"Then, you do not wish to parley?"

"With whom?"

"Come, caballero, suppose we are frank with one another—are you willing?"

"I wish for nothing better."

"You know as well as I do that we are fighting for our independence."

"Very good. In that case you are insurgents?"

"Certainly, and feel proud of the title."

"Hum! we do not treat with insurgents, who are placed beyond the pale of the law."

"Caballero," the Jaguar exclaimed, "I have the honour of remarking that you insult me."

"I am very sorry for it; but what other answer than that can I give you?"

"Are you the commandant?" asked the Jaguar.

"No."

"Hum! and who is the governor of the place?"

"A colonel."

"Why did he not come in person to meet me?"

"Because he probably did not think it worth while."

"Hum! that way of behaving seems to me rather lax, for war has laws which every man is bound to follow."

"May be, but it is not war in this case, but insurrection."

"Well, I wish to speak with your commandant, for I can only treat with him. Are you disposed to let me see him?"

"That does not depend on me, but on him."

"Can I trust to your delivering my message?"

"I do not see why I should not."

"Be kind enough, then, to return at once to him, and I will wait for you here."

"Very well."

The two men bowed courteously, and took leave of each other. Don Felix Paz re-entered the fortress, while the Jaguar, sitting on the trunk of a felled tree, examined with the greatest attention the fortifications of the hacienda, the details of which he could easily survey from the spot where he now was. The young man leaned his elbow on his knee, and let his head rest on his hand; his eyes wandered over the surrounding objects with an expression of indefinable melancholy; gradually a gloomy sadness seized on his mind; while indulging in his thoughts, external objects disappeared from his sight, and isolating himself completely, he gave way to the flood of bitter recollections which rose from his heart to his brain, and removed him from the pre-occupations of his present situation.

For a long time he had been plunged in this species of prostration, when a friendly voice smote his ear. The Jaguar, suddenly drawn from his reverie by

the sound of a voice which he fancied he recognised, threw up his head sharply, and gave a start of surprise on recognising Don Juan Melendez de Gongora, for it was really the colonel who was now addressing him.

"Back, gentlemen," said the Texan chief; "this gentleman and myself have private matters to talk about."

The Texans withdrew out of ear-shot. The colonel was alone, for on recognising the Jaguar, he had ordered his escort to await him at the base of the intrenchments.

"I meet you here again then, my friend," the Jaguar said sadly.

"Yes," the young officer answered; "fatality seems determined to keep us in constant opposition."

"On examining the height and strength of your walls," the Independent continued, "I had already recognised the difficulties of the task forced on me; these difficulties have now grown almost into impossibilities."

"Alas! my friend, fate wills it so; we are forced to submit to its caprices; and while in my heart deploring what takes place, I am yet resolved to do my duty as a man of honour."

"I know it, brother; for I too am resolved to carry out the difficult task imposed on me."

"Such are the terrible exigencies of civil war."

"Heaven and our country will judge us, friend, and our consciences will absolve us; men are not combating, but principles fatally placed in opposition."

"I was not aware that you were the chief of the insurrectionary bands that have invested the place, although a secret foreboding warned me of your presence."

"That is strange," the Jaguar muttered, "for I also felt the same foreboding; that is why I so strongly insisted on having an interview with the commandant."

"The same reason urged me, on the contrary, not to show myself; but I thought I must yield to your entreaty, and hence here I am; but I could have wished to avoid this interview."

"It is better that it should have taken place; now that we have had a frank explanation."

"You are right; it is perhaps better that it should be so; let me press your honest hand for the last time."

"Here is my hand, friend," the young chief made answer.

The two men shook hands, and then fell back a few paces, making a signal to their respective escorts to rejoin them. When the officers were ranged behind the chiefs, the Jaguar ordered his bugler to sound the summons; the latter obeyed, and the Mexican trumpet immediately replied. The Jaguar then advanced two paces, and courteously took off his hat to the colonel.

"With whom have I the honour of speaking?" he asked.

"I am," the officer replied, returning the salute, "Colonel Don Juan Melendez de Gongora, invested by General Don José-Maria Rubio, commander-in-chief of the Mexican forces in Texas, with the military government of the Larch-tree hacienda, which present circumstances have raised to the rank of a first-class fortress; and who may you be, caballero?"

"I," the Jaguar answered, as he placed his hat again on his head, "am the supreme chief of the Confederate Army of Texas."

"The men who take that name, and the person who commands them, can only be regarded by me as traitors."

"We care little, colonel, what name you give us. We have taken up arms to render our country independent, and shall not lay them down till that noble task is accomplished. I have proposals I think it my duty to make you."

"I cannot treat with rebels," the colonel said.

"You will act as you please, colonel; but humanity orders you to avoid bloodshed, if possible, and your duty imperiously commands you to listen to what I have to say to you."

"Be it so, caballero, I will listen to you, and then will see what answer I have to give you."

The Jaguar leaned the point of his sabre on the ground, and continued, in a loud and firm voice—

"I, the commander-in-chief of the Liberating Army of Texas, summon you, a colonel in the service of the Mexican Republic, whose sovereignty we no longer recognise, to surrender to us this Larch-tree hacienda, of which you call yourself the governor. If, within twenty-four hours, the said hacienda is put into our hands, with all it contains—guns, ammunition, material of war, and otherwise, the garrison will quit the place with the honours of war, under arms, with drums and fifes playing. Then, after laying down their arms, the garrison will be free to retire to the interior of Texas, after making oath that during a year and a day they will not serve in Texas against the Liberating Army."

"Have you ended?" the colonel asked.

"Not yet," the Jaguar coldly answered.

"I must ask you to make haste."

On seeing these two men exchange savage glances, and placed in such a hostile position face to face, no one would have supposed that they groaned in their hearts at the painful part fate compelled them to play against their will. The truth was, that in one military fanaticism, in the other an ardent love of his country, had imposed silence on every other feeling, and only permitted them to listen to one, the most imperious of all—the sentiment of duty. The Jaguar continued in the same resolute accent—

"If, against my expectations, these conditions are refused, and the place obstinately defends itself, the Army of Liberation will immediately invest it, carry on the siege with all the vigour of which it is capable, and when the hacienda is captured, it will undergo the fate of towns taken by assault; the garrison will be decimated, and remain prisoners till the end of the war."

"Very good," the colonel replied, ironically; "however harsh these conditions may be, we prefer them to the former."

The Jaguar bowed ceremoniously.

"I have only to withdraw," he said.

"One moment," the colonel said. "You have explained your conditions, now hear mine."

"What conditions can you have to offer us, since you refuse to surrender?"

"You shall hear."

"I," he said, in a sharp and sarcastic voice, "Don Juan de Melendez de Gongora, colonel in the service of the Mexican Republic, considering that the majority of the individuals assembled at this moment at the foot of my walls are poor, ignorant men, whom bad example and bad counsel have led into a revolt, which they detest in their hearts—employing the prerogative given me by my title of governor of a first-class fortress, and a field officer in the Mexican army, I promise that if they immediately lay down their arms, and, as a proof of sincere repentance, surrender to me the chiefs who deceived them and led them into revolt—I promise them, I repeat, complete pardon and oblivion of the faults they may have committed up to to-day, but only on this condition. They have till sunset of the present day to make their submission; when that period is passed, they will be regarded as inveterate rebels, and treated as such—that is to say, hanged without trial, after their identity has been proved, and

deprived, in their last moments, of the consolations of religion, as being unworthy of them. As for the chiefs, as traitors, they will be shot in the back, and their bodies fastened by the feet on gibbets, where they will remain as food for birds of prey, and serve as an example to those who may venture in their track."

His hearers had listened with increasing surprise to this strange address, uttered in a tone of sarcasm and haughty contempt, which had filled the hearts of the Jaguar's comrades with gall, while the Mexican officers looked at each other with a laugh. By a sign, the Jaguar imposed silence on his comrades, and bowed respectfully to the colonel.

"Your will be done," he said to him; "the blood shed will fall on your head."

"I accept the responsibility," the commandant remarked, disdainfully.

"We will fight, then," the Jaguar exclaimed, enthusiastically. "Hurrah for Texas!"

This cry, repeated by his comrades, was heard in the camp, and taken up with extraordinary enthusiasm.

"*Viva Mejico!*" the colonel said.

He then retired, followed by his officers. On his side, the Jaguar returned to his camp, resolved to attempt a vigorous hand-stroke on the place. On both sides preparations were made for the implacable struggle that was about to begin between members of the same family and children of the same soil.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SIEGE.

WHILE all this was going on, the hunters resumed their journey, so soon as the Apaches disappeared. The night was clear, and the hunters marched in Indian file, that is to say, one after the other; still, through a prudential motive, Carmela was placed pillion-wise behind Tranquil, while Singing-bird rode with Black-deer.

The Canadian had whispered a few words to Lanzi and Quoniam, upon which the two men, without replying, spurred their horses, and started at a gallop.

"When you have ladies with you," Tranquil said, "it is necessary to take precautions."

The hunter, however, did not ask him for any explanation, and the four men continued their march in silence. During the whole night nothing occurred to disturb their journey; the Apaches kept their word faithfully. Tranquil had not for a moment doubted their promise. At times the hunter turned to the maiden, and asked her with ill-disguised anxiety if she felt fatigued, but Carmela constantly replied in the negative. A few minutes before sunrise he bent down to her for the last time.

"Courage," he said, "we shall soon be there."

The girl attempted to smile, but this long night spent on horseback had crushed her; she could not even find the courage to answer, so annihilated was she, and Tranquil, anxious for his daughter, hurried on. Still in the sunbeams, whose warmth caressed her, the maiden felt new-born, her courage returned, and she drew herself up with a sigh of relief. Two hours later they reached the base of a hill, half-way up which was a natural grotto.

"Our friends are expecting us there," said Tranquil.

A few moments later the little band entered the grotto on horseback, without leaving any traces of its passage. This grotto, like many others in that country, possessed several entrances, and through this peculiarity it often served as a refuge to the wood-rangers. It was divided into several compartments, without visible communication with each other, and formed a species of maze under the whole of the hill. On the prairie the name of the Jaguar's grotto had been given it.

The two hunters, sent forward by the Canadian, were seated by an enormous fire of heather, and quietly roasting a magnificent haunch of venison, as they silently smoked their pipes. Although they must have been waiting a long time for their friends, on the arrival of Tranquil and his comrades they contented themselves with a slight bow, and did not evince the slightest desire to know what had occurred since their departure. Tranquil led the two females into a grotto a considerable distance from the principal one.

"Here," he said in a gentle whisper, "you must speak as little as possible, and as low as you can, for you never know what neighbours you may have; pay great attention to this piece of advice, for your safety depends on it. If you require me, or have an inclination to join us, you know where we are, and it is an easy matter for you to come; good-bye."

His daughter caught him by the arm for a moment, and whispered in his ear. He bowed in reply, and went out. When the two females found themselves alone, their first impulse was to fall into each other's arms. This first emotion past, they lay on the ground with that feeling of comfort which is experienced when you have sighed during a long period for a rest, the want of which you greatly feel. At the expiration of about an hour Tranquil returned.

"Are you going to start again?" Carmela asked.

"On the contrary, I expect to remain here till sunset."

"Heaven be praised!" the maiden exclaimed.

"I have come to tell you that breakfast is ready, and that we are only awaiting your presence to begin."

"Eat without us, papa," Carmela answered; "at this moment we have more need of sleep than anything else."

"Sleep if you like; I have brought you, however, male clothing, which I must ask you to put on."

"What, father! dress ourselves as men?" Carmela said, in surprise and with a slight repugnance.

"You must, child—it is indispensable."

"In that case I will obey you, father."

"Thank you, my daughter."

The hunter withdrew, and the two young women soon fell asleep. Their sleep lasted a long time, for the sun was beginning to sink beneath the horizon, when they awoke, completely recovered from their fatigue. Carmela, fresh and rosy, felt no effects of the long sleeplessness of the preceding night; and the Indian girl, stronger or more hardened, had not suffered so much as her companion. The two girls then began, while chattering and laughing, to prepare everything necessary for their disguise.

"Let us begin our toilette," Carmela said gaily to Singing-bird.

At the moment when they were removing their dresses, they heard the noise of footsteps near them, and turned like two startled fawns, thinking that Tranquil was coming to see whether they were awake; but a few words distinctly pronounced, caused them to listen, and stand quivering with emotion, surprise, and curiosity.

"My brother has been a long time," the voice had said, which seemed to belong to a man standing scarce three paces from them; "I have been expecting him for two hours."

"By Heaven, chief, your remark is perfectly correct; but it was impossible for me to come sooner," another person immediately answered.

"My brother will speak without loss of time."

"That is what I intend doing."

At this moment Tranquil came up. The young women laid the fore-finger on their lips; the hunter understood, and advanced on tip-toe to listen.

"The Jaguar," the second speaker continued, "desires most eagerly that, in accordance with the promise you made him, you should join his army."

"Up to the present that has been impossible."

"Blue-fox!" Tranquil muttered.

"I warn you, that he accuses you of breach of faith."

"The pale chief is wrong; a sachem is not a chattering old woman. This evening I shall join him with two hundred picked warriors."

"We shall see, chief."

"At the first song of the mankawis, the Apache warriors will enter the camp."

"All the better. The Jaguar is preparing a general assault on the fort, and only awaits your arrival."

"I repeat, that the Apaches will not fail."

"Those confounded Mexicans fight like demons; the man who commands them seems to have galvanised them, they second him so well. There was only one good officer in the Mexican army, and we were obliged to fight against him. It is really most unlucky."

"The chief of the Yoris is not invulnerable. The arrows of the Apaches are long—they will kill him."

"Nonsense," the other said; "this man seems to have a charm that protects him, no bullet can hit him."

"While coming to this grotto, Blue-fox raised the scalp of a chief who was the bearer of a necklace."

"A letter, by Heavens!" the other exclaimed anxiously; "what have you done with it? You have not destroyed it, I trust?"

"No, the chief has kept it."

"Show it to me, perhaps it is important."

"Wah! it is some medicine of the pale-faces; a chief does not want it; my brother can take it."

"Thanks!"

There was a moment's silence, during which the hearts of the three hearers might have been heard beating in unison, so great was their anxiety.

"By Jove!" the white man suddenly burst out; "a letter addressed to Colonel Don Juan Melendez de Gongora, commandant of the Larch-tree, by General Rubio. You were in luck's way, chief. Are you sure that the bearer of this letter is dead?"

But while speaking thus, the two men had withdrawn, and the sound of their voices was lost in the distance, so that it was impossible to hear the answer.

The two women turned round. Tranquil had disappeared, and they were again alone. Carmela, after listening to this strange conversation, of which accident allowed her to catch a few fragments, had fallen into a profound reverie, which her companion, with that sense of propriety innate in Indians, was careful not to disturb.

In the meanwhile time slipped away, the gloom grew denser in the grotto, for night had set in; the two young women, afraid to remain alone in the obscurity, were preparing to rejoin their companions, when they heard the sound of footsteps, and Tranquil entered.

"Come," the Canadian said, after examining them for a moment; "we are going to try and enter the Larch-tree hacienda. Now follow me, and be prudent."

The eight persons left the grotto, gliding along in the darkness like phantoms.

No one, unless he has tried the experiment, can imagine what a night-march on the desert is, when you are afraid each moment of falling into the hands of invisible enemies, who watch you behind every bush. Tranquil had placed himself at the head of the little party, who marched in Indian file, at times stooping to the ground, going on his hands and knees, or crawling on his stomach so as to avoid notice.

Fortunately the Indians keep very bad guard, and most generally only place sentries to frighten the enemy. On this occasion, as they knew very well, they had no sortie to apprehend on the part of the Larch-tree garrison, the sentinels were nearly all asleep; but the slightest badly-calculated move, the merest false step, might arouse them, for these men, who are habituated in keeping their senses alive, can hardly ever be taken unawares.

At about two hundred yards at the most from the adventurers were the advanced works of the Larch-tree, gloomy, silent, and apparently, at least, abandoned or plunged in sleep. Tranquil had only stopped to let his comrades fully understand the imminent danger to which they were exposed, and urge them to redouble their caution, for, at the slightest weakness, they would be lost. After this they started again. They advanced thus for one hundred yards, or about half the distance separating them from the Larch-tree, when suddenly, at the moment when Tranquil stretched out his arms to shelter himself behind a sand-hill, several men, crawling in the opposite direction, found themselves face to face with him. There was a second of terrible anxiety.

"Who goes there?" a low and menacing voice asked.

"Oh!" he said; "we are saved! It is I—Tranquil the Tigreiro."

"Who are the persons with you?"

"Wood-rangers, for whom I answer."

"Very good; pass on."

The two parties separated, and crawled in opposite directions. The band with which the hunters exchanged these few words was commanded by Don Felix Paz, who, more vigilant than the Texans, was making a round of the glacis to assure himself that all was quiet, and no surprise need be feared. It was very lucky for Tranquil and his companions that the Jaguar, in order to do honour to Blue-fox, had this night entrusted the camp-guard to his warriors, and that, confiding in the red-skins, the Texans had gone to sleep.

Ten minutes after their encounter with Don Felix, which might have turned out so fatally for them, the hunters reached the gates, and at the mention of Tranquil's name a passage was at once granted them. They were at length in safety within the hacienda, and it was high time that they should arrive; a few minutes longer, and Carmela and her companion would have fallen by the wayside. In spite of all their courage and good-will, the girls could no longer keep up, their strength was exhausted. Hence so soon as the danger had passed, and the nervous excitement, which alone sustained them, ceased, they fell down unconscious.

Tranquil raised Carmela in his arms, and carried her to the interior of the

hacienda; while Black-deer, who, in spite of his apparent insensibility, adored his squaw, hurried up to restore her to life.

The unexpected arrival of Tranquil caused a general joy among the inhabitants of the hacienda, who all had a deep friendship for this man, whose glorious character they had had so many opportunities of appreciating. The hunter was still busied with his daughter, who was just beginning to recover her senses, when Don Felix Paz, who had finished his rounds, entered the cuarto, with a message from the colonel to the Canadian, begging the latter to come to him at once.

Tranquil obeyed, for Dona Carmela no longer required his assistance—the maiden had scarce regained her senses, ere she fell into a deep sleep, the natural result of the enormous fatigue she had endured during several days. While proceeding to the colonel's apartments, Tranquil questioned the major-domo, with whom he had been connected for several years, and who had no scruples about answering the hunter's queries.

Matters were far from being well at the Larch-tree; the siege was carried on with an extraordinary obstinacy on both sides, and with many strange interludes. The insurgents greatly annoyed by the artillery of the fort, which killed a great many of them, and to which they could not reply, owing to their absolute want of cannon, had adopted a system of reprisals, which caused the besieged considerable injury. This simple system was as follows: The insurgents, who were mostly hunters, were exceedingly skilful marksmen, and renowned as such in a country where the science of firing is carried to its extreme limits. A certain number of these marksmen sheltered themselves behind the epaulments of the camp; and each time a gunner attempted to load a piece, they infallibly shot away his hands.

This had been carried so far, that nearly all the gunners were *hors de combat*, and it was only at very long intervals that a gun was fired from the fort. This isolated shot, badly aimed, owing to the precipitancy with which the men laid the gun, through their fear of being mutilated, caused but insignificant damage to the insurgents.

On the other hand, the fort was so closely invested, and watched with such care that no one could enter or quit it. It was impossible for those in the fort to understand how it was that our adventurers had managed to slip in after traversing the whole length of the enemy's camp.

The garrison of the hacienda lived, then, as if they had been roughly cut off from the world, for no sound transpired without, and no news reached them. This situation was extremely disagreeable to the Mexicans; unfortunately for them it was daily aggravated, and threatened to become, ere long, completely intolerable. Colonel Melendez, since the beginning of the siege, had proved himself what he was, that is to say, an officer of rare merit, with a vigilance nothing could foil, and the coolest bravery. Seeing his gunners so cruelly decimated by the Texan bullets, he undertook to take their place, loading the guns at his own peril, and firing them at the insurgents.

Such courage struck the Texans with so great admiration, that although it would several times have been easy for them to kill their daring foe, their rifles had constantly turned away from this man, who seemed to find a delight in braving death. The Jaguar, too, while closely investing the fort, and eagerly desiring to carry it, had given peremptory orders to spare the life of his friend, whom he could not refrain from pitying and admiring, as much for his courage as for his devotion.

Although it was near midnight, the colonel was still up; at the moment when the hunter was brought to him, he was walking thoughtfully up and down, consulting from time to time a detailed plan of the fortifications.

Tranquil's arrival caused him great satisfaction, for he hoped to obtain from him news from without. Unfortunately, the hunter did not know much about the political state of the country, owing to the isolated life he led in the forests. Still, he answered with the greatest frankness all the questions the colonel thought proper to ask him, and gave him the little information he had been enabled to collect; then he told him the various incidents of his own journey. At the name of Carmela the young officer was slightly troubled, and a vivid flush suffused his face; but he recovered, and listened attentively to the hunter's story. When the latter came to the incident in the grotto, and the fragment of conversation he had overheard between the Apache chief and the Texan, his interest was greatly excited, and made him repeat the story.

"Oh, that letter," he muttered several times, "that letter; what would I not give to know its contents!"

Unhappily, that was impossible. After a moment, the colonel begged Tranquil to continue his story. The hunter then told him in what way he had managed to cross the enemy's lines. This bold action greatly struck the colonel.

"You were more fortunate than prudent," he said, "in thus venturing into the midst of your enemies."

The hunter smiled good-temperedly.

"I was almost certain of succeeding," he said.

"How so?"

"I have had a long experience of Indian habits, which enables me to make nearly certain with them."

"Granted; but in this case you had not Indians to deal with."

"Pardon me, colonel."

"I do not understand you, so be kind enough to explain."

"That is an easy matter. Blue-fox entered the Texan camp this evening, at the head of two hundred warriors."

"I was not aware of it," the colonel said.

"The Jaguar, to do honour to his terrible allies, confided to them the camp-guard for this night."

"Hence?"

"Hence, colonel, all the Texans are sleeping soundly at this moment, while the Apaches are watching, or, at least, ought to be watching."

"What do you mean by ought to be watching?"

"I mean that the red-skins do not at all understand our manner of carrying on war, are not accustomed to sentinel duty, and so everybody is asleep in the camp."

"Ah!" said the colonel, as he resumed, with a thoughtful air, his promenade.

The latter waited, taking an interrogative glance at Don Felix, who had remained in the room till it pleased the commandant to dismiss him. A few minutes passed, and not a syllable was exchanged; Don Juan seemed to be plunged in serious thought. All at once he stopped before the hunter, and looked him full in the face.

"I have known you for a long time by reputation," he said. "You pass for a man who can be trusted."

The Canadian bowed, not understanding to what these preliminaries tended.

"I think you said the enemy's camp was plunged in sleep?" the colonel continued.

"That is my conviction," Tranquil answered; "we crossed their lines too easily for it to be otherwise."

Don Felix drew nearer.

"Yes," the young officer muttered, "we might give them a lesson."

"A lesson they greatly need," the major-domo added.

"Ah, ah!" the colonel said, with a smile; "then you understand me, Don Felix?"

"Most undoubtedly."

"It is one in the morning," the colonel went on, as he looked at a clock standing on a console; "at this moment sleep is the deepest. Well, we will attempt a sortie; have the officers of the garrison aroused."

The major-domo went out: five minutes later, the officers, still half-asleep, obeyed their chief's orders.

"Caballeros," the latter said to them, so soon as he saw them all collected round him, "I have resolved to make a sortie against the rebels, surprise them, and fire their camp, if it be possible. Select from your soldiers one hundred and fifty men in whom you can trust; supply them with inflammable matters, and in five minutes let them be drawn up in the patio."

The officers bowed, and at once left the room. The colonel then turned to Tranquil.

"Are you tired?"

"I am never so."

"Very good. You will serve as our guide; unfortunately, I want two others.

"I can procure them for your excellency."

"You?"

"Yes, a wood-ranger and a Comanche chief, who entered the fort with me, and for whom I answer with my head; Loyal Heart and Black-deer."

"Let all three wait for me in the patio."

Tranquil hastened to call his friends.

"If that hunter has spoken the truth, and I believe he has," the colonel continued, addressing the major-domo, "I am convinced we shall have an excellent opportunity for repaying the rebels the harm they have done us. Do you accompany me, Don Felix?"

"I would not for a fortune leave you one inch under such circumstances."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PROPOSAL.

ON the same night, almost at the same hour, the Jaguar, seated on a modest oak equipal in his tent, and with his elbow leaning on the table and his head on his hand, was reading, by the light of a candle that emitted but a dubious light, some important despatches. Absorbed in the perusal, the young commander of the insurgents paid no attention to the noises without, when suddenly a rather sharp puff of wind caused the flame of the candle to flicker, and the shadow of a man was darkly defined on the canvas of the tent.

The young man, annoyed at being disturbed, raised his head angrily, and looked toward the entrance of the tent, with a frown that promised nothing very pleasant for his inopportune intruder. But at the sight of the man who stood in the door-way, leaning on a long rifle, and fixing on him eyes that sparkled

like carbuncles, the Jaguar restrained with difficulty a cry of surprise, and made a move to seize the pistols placed within reach on the table.

This man, whom we have already had occasion to present to the reader under very grave circumstances, had nothing in his appearance that spoke greatly in his favour. His stern glance, his harsh face, his long white beard, his tall stature and strange attire, all about him inspired repulsion and almost terror. The Jaguar's movement produced a sinister smile on his pale lips.

"Why take up your weapons?" he said, in a hoarse voice; "had I intended to kill you, you would have been dead long ago."

The young man wheeled round his equipal, which brought him face to face with the stranger. The two men examined each other for a moment with the most minute attention.

"Have you looked at me enough?" the stranger at length asked.

"Yes," the Jaguar answered; "now tell me who you are, what brings you here, and how you entered?"

"Those are a good many questions at once, still I will try to answer them. Who am I? No one knows, and there are moments when I am myself ignorant; I am an accursed, and a reprobate, prowling about the desert like a wild beast in search of prey; the red-skins, whose implacable enemy I am, and in whom I inspire a superstitious terror, call me the Kiein Stoman; is this information sufficient for you?"

"What?" the young man exclaimed; "the White Scalper!"

"I am the man," the stranger quietly answered; "I am also known at times by the name of the Pitiless."

The Jaguar gave a start of repulsion at the sight of this sinister man, whose mournful reputation had reached him with all its horrors. His memory immediately recalled all the traits of ferocity and cruelty imputed to this man, and it was under the impression of this recollection that he said to him, with an accent of disgust he did not wish to conceal—

"What is there in common between you and me?"

The old man smiled sarcastically.

"God," he answered, "connects all men to each other by invisible bonds which render them responsible one for the other; He willed it so, in His supreme omniscience, in order to render society possible."

On hearing this wild, solitary man utter so strange an argument, the Jaguar felt his surprise redoubled.

"I will not discuss the point with you," he said; "every one in life follows the path destiny has traced for him, and it does not belong to me to judge you either favourably or unfavourably; still I have the right of denying any connection with you, whatever may be your feelings toward me, or the motives that brought you hither; up to the present we have been strangers to each other, and I desire to remain so for the future."

"What do you know of it? What certainty have you that this is the first time we have been face to face? Man can no more answer for the past than for the future; each is in the hands of One more powerful than him, for whom there is only one weight and one measure."

"I am astonished," the Jaguar answered, "that the name of Deity should be so often on your lips."

"Because it is deeply engraved on my heart," the old man said, with an accent of gloomy sorrow. "You said yourself that you would not judge me; retain, if you will, the evil impression which the probable false statements of others have made on you. I care little for the opinion of men; I recognise no judge of my actions but my conscience."

"Be it so; but permit me to remark that time is rapidly slipping away, night is advancing. I have serious business to attend to, and need to be alone."

"In a word, you show me the door; unluckily I am not disposed for the present to accede to your request, or, if you prefer it, obey your orders; I wish first to answer all your questions, and then, if you still insist on it, I will retire."

"Take care, for this obstinacy on your part may lead to dangerous consequences for you."

"Why threaten a man who does not insult you?" the old man replied. "Do you fancy that I put myself out of the way for nothing? No, no, serious motives bring me here; and if I am not mistaken, ere long you will allow that the time you are unwilling to grant me could not be better employed."

"Speak then," said the Jaguar a moment after, in the tone of a man who resigns himself to endure a thing that displeases him, but which he cannot elude; "but pray be brief."

"I am not so used to speaking as to find pleasure in making long harangues," the Scalper replied; "I will only say things strictly indispensable."

"Do so, then, without further preamble."

"Be it so. I now return to the third question—How I got here?"

"In truth," the Jaguar exclaimed, "that seems to me extraordinary."

"Not so extraordinary as you suppose; I might tell you that I am too old a hand on the prairies not to foil the most vigilant sentries; but I prefer confessing the truth, as it will be more profitable to you. You have this night confided the guard of the camp to Apache dogs, who, instead of watching, as they pledged themselves to do, are asleep on their posts, so thoroughly that the first comer can enter your lines as he thinks proper; and this is so true, that scarce two hours back a party of eight went through the whole length of your camp, and entered the hacienda, without encountering opposition."

"Viva Dios!" the Jaguar exclaimed, turning livid with passion; "can it possibly be so?"

"I am the proof of it, I fancy," the old man answered.

The young chief seized his pistols and made a movement to rush out, but the stranger restrained him.

"What good will it do," he said, "to pick a quarrel with your allies? Still, let it serve you as a lesson to take better precautions another time."

"But these men who crossed the camp?" the Jaguar said sharply.

"You have nothing to fear from them; they are poor devils of hunters, who were probably seeking a refuge for the two women they brought with them."

"Two women?"

"Yes, a white and an Indian; although they were dressed in male attire, I recognised them easily."

"Ah," said the Jaguar thoughtfully, "do you know any of these hunters?"

"Only one, who is, I believe, tigrero to the hacienda."

"Tranquil!" the Jaguar exclaimed.

"Yes."

"In that case, one of the females is his daughter *Carmela*."

"Probably."

"She is now, then, at the Larch-tree?"

"Yes."

"Oh," he burst out, "I must at all hazards carry that accursed hacienda."

"That is exactly what I came to propose to you," the Scalper said quietly.

"What do you say?" asked the young man.

"I say," the old man replied, "that I have come to propose to you the capture of the hacienda."

"Because it is impossible," the Jaguar went on with agitation; "the hacienda is well fortified: it is defended by a numerous and brave garrison, commanded by one of the best officers of the Mexican army, and for the seventeen days I have been investing these accursed walls, I have been unable, despite all my efforts, to take one forward step."

"I repeat my proposition."

"But how will you effect it?"

"When force does not avail, stratagem must be employed. I will introduce you into the interior—the rest is your affair."

"Oh, once inside, I will not leave it again."

"Then you accept?"

"But explain. It is not admissible that you have come to make such a proposal for my sake, or that of the cause I serve."

"Perhaps not."

"Let us deal frankly. Whatever your character may be, you have a manner of looking at things which renders you perfectly indifferent to the chances, good or bad, of the struggle going on at this moment in this unhappy country."

"You are quite correct."

"Am I not? You care little whether Texas be free or in slavery?"

"I admit it."

"You have, then, a reason for acting as you are now doing?"

"A man always has a reason."

"Very good; well, I wish to know that reason."

"And suppose I refuse to tell it you?"

"I shall not accept your proposition."

"You are a suspicious and headstrong boy," the old man said, "who, through a false feeling of honour, risk losing an opportunity which you will probably never find again."

"I will run the risk; I wish to be frank with you; I only know you from very ill reports; your reputation is execrable, and nothing proves to me that, under the pretext of serving me, you may not be laying a snare."

The old man's pale face was covered by a sudden flush at these words, a nervous tremor agitated all his limbs; but, by a violent effort, he succeeded in mastering his emotion, and after a few minutes, he replied in a calm voice, in which, however, there remained some traces of the tempest that growled hoarsely in his heart—

"I forgive you," he said; "you had a right to speak to me as you did, and I should not be angry. Time is slipping away, it is nearly one in the morning; it will soon be too late to execute the bold plan I have formed; I will, therefore, only add one word—reflect before answering me, for on that answer my resolution depends. The motive that urges me to offer to introduce you to the hacienda is personal, and in no way affects or concerns you."

"But what guarantee can you offer me of the sincerity of your intentions?"

The old man stepped forward, drew himself up to his full height, and said—

"My word, the word of a man who, whatever may be said about him, has never failed in what he owes himself; I swear to you on my honour, before that God in whose presence you and I will probably soon appear, that my intention is pure and loyal. Now, answer, what is your resolve?"

While uttering these words, the old man's attitude, gestures, and face, were imprinted with such nobility and grandeur, that he seemed transfigured. In spite of himself, the Jaguar was affected: he felt himself led away by this accent, which seemed to come straight from the heart.

"I accept," he said in a firm voice.

"I expected it," the old man replied; "in young and generous natures good feelings always find an echo."

"Here is my hand," the young man said passionately; "press it without fear, for it is that of a friend."

"Thanks," the old man said, as a burning tear beaded on his eyelashes; "that word repays me for much suffering and sorrow."

"Now, explain your plan to me."

"I will do so in two words; but, ere we discuss the plan we shall adopt, collect noiselessly three or four hundred men, so that we may be able to start immediately we have come to an understanding."

"You are right."

"I need not advise you to be prudent; your men must assemble in absolute silence. Take no red-skins with you, for they would be more injurious than useful."

"I will act as you wish."

The Jaguar went out, and remained away for about a quarter of an hour; during that time the White Scalper remained motionless in the centre of the tent, leaning pensively on his rifle-barrel, the butt of which rested on the ground. Soon could be heard outside something like the imperceptible buzzing of bees in a hive. It was the camp awakening. The Jaguar came in again.

"The order is given," he said. "In a quarter of an hour four hundred men will be under arms."

"That is a longer period than I need for what I have to say; my plan is most simple, and if you follow it point for point we shall enter the hacienda without striking a blow; listen to me attentively."

"Speak."

"For very many years I have known the Larch-tree hacienda. Owing to events too long to tell you, I was resident in it for nearly a year as major-domo. At that period the father of the present owner was still living, and for sundry reasons had the greatest confidence in me. You are aware that at the period of the conquest, when the Spaniards built these haciendas, they made them fortresses rather than farm-houses. Now, you must know that in every such fortress there is a masked gate, a secret sallyport, which, if necessary, the garrison employ, either to receive reinforcements or provisions, or to evacuate the place, should it be too closely invested."

"Oh," the Jaguar said, smiting his forehead, "can the hacienda have one of these sallyports?"

"Patience, let me go on."

"But look," the young man objected, "here is the detailed plan of the Larch-tree, made by a man whose family have lived there for three generations, from father to son, and there is nothing of the sort marked on it."

"Because," replied the old man, "the secret is generally known to the owner of the hacienda alone. These sallyports, so useful at the time of the conquest, became neglected, owing to the long peace that reigned in the country; then, by degrees, as they served no purpose, the recollection of them was lost, and I am convinced that the majority of the hacenderos at the present day are ignorant of the existence of these secret gates in their habitation; the owner of the Larch-tree is one of the number."

"How do you know? perhaps the gate is blocked up, or at least defended by a strong detachment."

"No," said the old man, "the gate is not stopped up, nor is it guarded."

"Are you certain?"

"Did I not tell you that I have been prowling about the neighbourhood for

some days? I wished to assure myself of the existence of this gate, which an accident led me to discover in former days. I have sought it, found it, and opened it."

"Viva Dios!" the Jaguar shouted joyfully, "in that case the hacienda is ours."

"I believe so, unless a fatality or a miracle occur."

"But where is the gate situated?"

"As usual, at a spot where it is the most unlikely to suspect its existence. Look," he added, bending over the plan, "the hacienda, being built on a height, runs a risk in the event of a long siege of seeing its wells dry up—does it not?"

"Yes."

"Very good. The river on this side runs along the foot of the rocks on which its walls are built."

"Yes, yes," said the young man.

"Judging rightly," he went on, "that on this side the hacienda was impregnable, you contented yourself with establishing on the river-bank a few outposts, intended to watch the enemy's movements."

"Any flight on that side is impossible—in the first place, owing to the height of the walls; and next, through the river, which forms a natural trench."

"Well, the gate by which we shall enter is among those very rocks, almost on a level with the water; it opens into a natural grotto, the entrance of which is so obstructed by creepers, that from the opposite bank it is impossible to suspect its existence."

"At length," the Jaguar exclaimed, "this redoubt, which has hitherto been one of the links of the heavy chain riveted round Texas, will be to-morrow one of the most solid barriers of her independence!"

"I hope to see you master of the place before sunrise."

With which words they left the tent. According to the Jaguar's orders, John Davis had roused four hundred men, chosen from the boldest and most skilful fellows of the force. They were drawn up a few paces from the tent, motionless and silent. Their rifles, whose barrels were bronzed lest they might emit any denunciatory gleams in the moonbeams, were piled in front of them.

The officers formed a group apart. They were conversing together in a low voice, with considerable animation, not at all understanding the orders they had received, and not knowing for what reason the chief had them awakened. The Jaguar advanced toward them, and the officers fell back. The young man, followed by the Scalper, entered the circle, which at once closed up again. John Davis, on perceiving the old man, uttered a stifled cry of surprise.

"Caballeros," the Jaguar said, in a low voice, "we are about to attempt a surprise, which, if it succeed, will render us masters of the hacienda almost without a blow."

A murmur of surprise ran round the circle.

"A person in whom I have the most entire confidence," the Jaguar continued, "has revealed to me the existence of a secret gate, not known to the garrison, which will give us access to the fort. Each of you will now take the command of his men. Our march must be as silent as that of Indian warriors on the war-path. You have understood me fully, so I count on your aid. In the event of separation, the watchword will be *Texas and liberty*. To your posts."

The circle was broken up, and each officer placed himself at the head of his men.

"One word," said John Davis, bending to his ear to speak. "Do you know who that man is, standing close to you?"

"It is the White Scalper."

"Was it he who revealed to you the existence of the sally-port by which we are to enter?"

"Yes; and I fully trust him."

"Well, you may be right," John replied; "but for all that, I will watch him."

"As you please."

"Well, let us be off."

The American followed his chief, casting a parting look of suspicion on the old man. The latter did not seem to trouble himself at all about this aside. Apparently indifferent to what went on around him, he waited, quietly leaning on his rifle, till it pleased the Jaguar to give the command for departure. At length, the word "march" ran from rank to rank, and the column started.

These men, the majority of whom were accustomed to long marches in the desert, placed their feet so softly on the ground, that they seemed to glide along like phantoms, so silent was their march. At this moment, as if the sky wished to be on their side, an immense black cloud spread across the heavens and interrupted the moonbeams, substituting, almost without transition, a deep obscurity for the radiance that previously prevailed, and the column disappeared in the gloom. A few paces ahead of the main body, the Jaguar, White Scalper, and John Davis marched side by side.

"Bravo!" the young man muttered; "everything favours us."

"Let us wait for the end," the American growled.

Instead of leaving the camp on the side of the hacienda, whose gloomy outline was designed, sinister and menacing, on the top of the hill, the Scalper made a long circuit, which skirted the rear of the camp. The deepest silence prevailed on the plain, the camp and hacienda seemed asleep, not a light gleamed in the darkness, and it might be fancied, on noticing so profound a calm, that the plain was deserted.

These men, who walked on tip-toe, sounding the darkness around them, and with their finger placed on the rifle-trigger, felt their hearts beat with impatience. It was a singular coincidence, a strange fatality, which caused the besiegers and besieged to attempt a double surprise at the same hour, almost at the same moment, and send blindly against each other men who on either side advanced with the hope of certain success, and convinced that they were about to surprise asleep the too confident enemy whom they burned to massacre.

So soon as they had left the camp, the insurgents drew near the river, whose banks, covered with thick bushes and aquatic plants, would have offered them, even in bright day, a certain shelter from the Mexicans. On coming within about half a league of the intrenchments, the column halted; the Scalper advanced alone a few yards, and then rejoined the Jaguar.

"We shall have to cross the river here," he said, "where there is a ford."

And, giving the example, the old man stepped into the bed of the river. The others followed immediately. They passed threes in front, and closing up the ranks, so as to resist the rather strong current, which, without these precautions, might have carried them away. Five minutes later, the whole band was collected in the interior of the grotto, at the end of which was the secret door.

"The moment has arrived," the Jaguar then said, "to redouble our prudence; let us avoid, if it be possible, bloodshed. Not a word must be uttered, or a shot fired, without my orders, under penalty of death." Then, turning to the White Scalper, he said, in a firm voice, "Now, open the door!"

There was a moment of supreme anxiety for the insurgents, who awaited with a quiver of impatience the downfall of the frail obstacle that separated them from their enemies.

CHAPTER XV.

A THUNDERBOLT.

THE colonel and the major-domo meanwhile went down to the patio, where they found assembled the one hundred and fifty men selected for the execution of the surprise. Tranquil, according to the orders he had received, after assuring himself that Carmela was enjoying a sound and refreshing sleep, hastened to tell Loyal Heart and Black-deer what the colonel expected from them. The two men immediately followed their friend into the patio.

The colonel divided his men into three detachments, each of fifty men: he took the command of the first, keeping the Canadian with him; Don Felix, having Loyal Heart for guide, had the command of the second; and the third, at the head of which was placed a captain, an old soldier of great experience, was directed by Black-deer. These arrangements made, the colonel gave the order for departure.

The colonel's plan was extremely simple: descend unheard to the rebels' camp, enter it, and fire it on three different sides; then, profiting by the disorder and tumult occasioned by this surprise, rush on the rebels with shouts of "Viva Mejico!" prevent them rallying or extinguishing the fire, massacre as many as possible, and afterwards effect an orderly retreat on the hacienda.

At the moment when the Mexicans left the hacienda, the same thing happened to them as to the insurgents, who left their camp at the same moment, that is to say, they were suddenly enveloped in thick darkness.

"This is a good omen for the success of our expedition," said the colonel.

The Jaguar was saying the same thing to White Scalper almost simultaneously.

The three detachments descended the hill, marching in Indian file, and taking the greatest care to stifle the sound of their footsteps on the ground. On coming within a certain distance of the Texan intrenchments, they halted, with one accord, to take breath, like tigers which, at the moment of leaping on the prey they covet, draw themselves up, in order to take a vigorous impetus. The soldiers wheeled, so as to present a rather extensive line; then each lay down on the sand, and at the signal, muttered in a low voice by the guides, they began crawling like reptiles through the tall grass, cutting passages through the bushes, advancing in a straight line, and clearing obstacles, without thinking of turning them.

We have said that White Scalper had objected to the Apache sentries being aroused, for he considered their vigilance quite unnecessary—not supposing for a moment that the Mexicans would dare to leave their lines of defence and take the initiative in a sally. The direction the old man had given to the detachment he guided, by drawing it away from the approaches of the fortress, had also favoured the colonel's plans, which, without that, would have been, in all probability, foiled.

Still the Canadian hunter was too prudent and accustomed to the tricks of Indian war not to assure himself previously that there were no traps to apprehend. Hence, on arriving about fifteen yards from the breastworks, he ordered a halt. Then, gliding like a serpent through the shrubs and dead trees that covered the ground at this spot, he pushed forward a reconnoissance. Loyal

Heart and Black-deer, to whom he had given detailed instructions how to act before leaving the hacienda, executed the same manœuvre. The absence of the scouts was long, or at least appeared so to all these men, who were so impatient to bound on the enemy and begin the attack. At length Tranquil returned, but he was anxious and frowning, and a gloomy restlessness seemed to agitate him.

"What is the matter with you?" the colonel asked him. "Are the rebels alarmed? Have you noticed any signs of agitation in their camp?"

"No," he replied, with his eyes obstinately fixed before him; "I have seen nothing, noticed nothing; the deepest calm, apparently, prevails in the camp."

"Apparently, do you say?"

"Yes; for it is impossible that this calm can be real, for most of the Texan insurgents are old hunters, accustomed to the rude fatigues of a desert life. I can just understand that, during the first part of the night, they might not notice the gross neglect of the Apache sentries; but what I cannot in any way admit is, that during the whole night not one of these partizans, to whom prudence is so imperiously recommended, should have got up to make the rounds and see that all was in order.

"And you conclude from this?"

"I conclude that we should return at full speed to the hacienda; for, unless I am greatly mistaken, this gloomy night covers some sinister mystery which we shall see accomplished ere long, and of which we may fall the victims, unless we take care."

"From what you say to me," the colonel made answer, "I see that you rather give me the expression of your own personal opinions than the result of facts."

"That is true, colonel; but if you will permit me to say so, I would observe that these opinions emanate from a man for whom the desert possesses no secrets, and whom his presentiments rarely deceive."

"Yes; all that is true; and perhaps I ought to follow your advice. My resolution has possibly been premature, but now, unfortunately, it is too late to recall it. Withdrawing is an impossibility, for that would prove to my soldiers that I was mistaken, which is not admissible. We must, at any cost, accept the consequences of our imprudence, and push on, no matter what happens.

"I am at your orders, colonel."

"Forward, then, and may heaven be favourable to us!" the young officer said, resolutely.

The order was whispered along the line, and the soldiers, whom this long conference had perplexed, and who were afraid they should be obliged to turn back, received it joyfully, and advanced with renewed ardour. The ground that separated them from the breastwork was soon covered, and the intrenchments were escaled ere a single Apache sentry had given the alarm.

Suddenly, from three different points of the camp an immense flame shot up, and the Mexicans rushed forward, shouting "*Viva Mexico!*" The insurgents, hardly awake, ran hither and thither, not understanding these flames which surrounded them, and these terrible yells which sounded in their ears like a funeral knell.

For nearly an hour the contest was a chaos; smoke and noise covered everything else. According to the American custom, most of the insurgents had their wives and children with them; hence, from the first moment the enclosure was covered with a confused medley of women. Apache horsemen galloped among the terrified foot soldiers and overthrown tents, from which rose the

groans of the wounded. All around the camp an immense line of smoke bordered the flames kindled by the Mexicans, who bounded like wild beasts, uttering fearful yells.

Still, when the first feeling of surprise had passed, the insurgents began gradually rallying, in spite of the incessant efforts of the Mexicans, and resistance was organised to a certain extent. Colonel Melendez had gained his object, the success of his plan was complete, the losses of the Texans in men and ammunition were immense; he did not wish, with the few troops he had under him, to advance further into a blazing camp, where they walked under a vault of flames, running the risk of being struck at each moment by the ruins of the powder magazines, which exploded one after the other with a terrible noise.

The colonel triumphantly glanced at the ruins piled up around him, and then ordered the retreat to be sounded.

The three detachments formed in a semi-circle, firing on the insurgents, who profited by the moment of respite chance afforded them to become constantly more numerous. They then noticed the small strength of their assailants, and rushed resolutely upon them. The Mexicans, now united, wished to effect their retreat, but at each instant their position became more difficult, and threatened to become even critical.

Colonel Melendez, seeing the danger of the position, collected forty resolute men, and placing himself at their head, rushed on the insurgents with an irresistible impetuosity. The latter, surprised in their turn by this vigorous attack, which they were far from expecting, recoiled, and at length fell back some hundred yards to re-form, closely pursued by the colonel.

This lucky diversion gave the main body of the Mexicans time to gain ground, and when the Texans returned to the charge with fresh ardour, the propitious moment had passed.

"*Viva Dios!*" the colonel said; "the affair was hot, but the advantage remains with us."

"I did not see the Jaguar during the whole action," the Canadian muttered.

"That is true," the young man replied, "and is most strange."

"His absence alarms me," the hunter said sadly.

"Where can he be?" the colonel remarked, suddenly turning thoughtful.

"Perhaps we shall learn only too soon," the Canadian replied with a shake of the head foreboding misfortune.

All at once, and as if chance had wished to justify the hunter's sad forebodings, an immense noise was heard in the hacienda, amid which could be distinguished cries of distress, and a well-sustained musketry fire. Then, a sinister glare rose above the Larch-tree, which it coloured with the hues of fire.

"Forward! forward!" the colonel cried; "the enemy have got into the fort!"

At the first glance, the young officer understood what had taken place, and the truth at once struck his mind. All rushed toward the hacienda, inside which an obstinate contest seemed to be raging. They soon reached the gates, and rushed into the patio, where a horrible spectacle offered itself to their sight. This is what had happened.

At the moment when White Scalper prepared to break in the door, the clamour made by the Mexicans in firing the camp reached the ears of the Texans.

"*Rayo de Dios!*" the Jaguar shouted; "what is the meaning of that?"

"Probably the Mexicans are attacking your camp," the old man quietly answered.

The young chief gave him an ugly look.

"We are betrayed," said John Davis, as he cocked a pistol, and pointed it at the old man.

"I am beginning to believe it," the Jaguar muttered.

"By whom?" the White Scalper asked with a smile of contempt.

"By you, you villain!" the American answered.

"You are mad," the old man said with a disdainful shrug; "if I had been false, should I have led you here?"

"That is true," said the Jaguar; "but it is strange, and the noise is unceasing. The Mexicans are doubtless massacring our companions; we must hurry to their assistance."

"Do nothing of the sort," the Scalper sharply exclaimed. "Hasten inside the fortress, which I doubt not is abandoned by the greater part of its defenders; your companions, so soon as they have rallied, will be strong enough to repulse their assailants."

"What is to be done?" muttered the Jaguar, with an undecided air, as he bent an inquiring glance on the men as they pressed round him.

"Act without loss of a moment," the old man eagerly exclaimed, and with a vigorously-dealt stroke he broke in the door, which fell in splinters to the ground; "here is the way open, will you recoil?"

"No! no!" they shouted impetuously, and rushed into the gaping vault before them.

This vault formed a passage wide enough for four persons to march abreast, and of sufficient height for them not to be obliged to stoop; it rose with a gentle incline, and resembled a species of labyrinth, owing to the constant turns it took. The darkness was complete, but the impulse had been given, and no other noise was audible save that of the panting breathing of these men, and their hurried footsteps, which sounded hollow on the damp ground they trod. After twenty minutes' march, which seemed to last an age, the Scalper's voice rose in the gloom, and uttered the single word, "Halt!"

"Here we shall have to make our final arrangements," he continued; "but in the first place let me procure you a light, so that you may know exactly where you are."

The old man, who seemed gifted with the privilege of seeing in the dark, walked about for some minutes in various directions, doubtless collecting the ingredients necessary for the fire he wished to kindle; then he struck a light, lit a piece of tinder, and almost immediately a brilliant flame seemed to leap forth from the ground, and illumined objects sufficiently for them to be distinguished. The Scalper had simply lighted a fire of dry wood, probably prepared beforehand.

The Texans looked curiously around. They found themselves in a very large, almost circular vault, somewhat resembling a crypt; the walls were lofty, and the roof was rounded in the shape of a dome. The ground was composed of a very fine dry sand, as yellow as gold. This room seemed cut out of the rock.

In the background, a staircase of some twenty steps, wide, and without bannister, mounted to the roof, where it terminated, and it was impossible to distinguish whether there were any trap-door or opening. This trap doubtless existed, but time had covered its openings with dust. After attentively examining the vault by the aid of a blazing log, the Jaguar returned to the old man, who had remained by the fire.

"Where are we?" he asked him.

"We are," he said, "exactly under the patio of the hacienda; this staircase ends in an opening I will point out to you, and which leads into a long-deserted

corral, in which, if I am not mistaken, the wood stores of the hacienda are now kept."

"Good," the Jaguar answered; "but before venturing into what may be an adroitly-laid trap, I should like, myself, to visit the corral of which you speak, in order to see with my own eyes."

"I ask nothing better than to lead you to it."

"Thank you; but I do not see exactly how we shall manage to open the passage of which you speak, without making a noise, which will immediately bring down on us the whole of the garrison, of which I am excessively afraid, as we are not at all conveniently situated for fighting."

"That need not trouble you; I pledge myself to open the trap without making the slightest noise."

"That is better; but come, time presses."

"That is true. Come."

The two men then proceeded to the flight of stairs. On reaching the top, the White Scalper thrust his head against the ceiling, and after several attempts a slab slowly rose, turned over, and fell noiselessly on its side, leaving a passage large enough for two men to pass together. White Scalper passed through this opening. With one bound the Jaguar stood by his side, pistol in hand, ready to blow out his brains at the first suspicious movement. But he soon perceived that the old man had no intention of betraying him, and, ashamed at the suspicion he had evinced, he hid his weapon.

As the Scalper had stated, they found themselves in an abandoned corral—a sort of vast stall, open to the sky, in which the Americans keep their horses; but this one was quite empty.

"Good," muttered the Jaguar, "you have kept your word; thank you."

The Scalper did not seem to hear him; his eyes were fixed on the door with a strange intensity, and his limbs trembled. Without attempting to discover the cause of his comrade's extraordinary emotion, the Jaguar ran to the opening, over which he bent down. John Davis was standing on the top step.

"Well?" he asked.

"All goes well. Come up, but do not make any noise."

The four hundred Texans then rose one after the other from the vault. Each, as he came out of the trap, silently fell in. When all had entered the corral, the Jaguar returned the slab to its place.

"Our retreat," he said, in a low voice, "is now cut off; we must either conquer or die."

The insurgents made no answer; but their eyes flashed such fire, that the Jaguar comprehended that they would not give way an inch. It was a moment of terrible suspense while White Scalper was forcing the door.

"Forward!" the Jaguar shouted.

All his comrades rushed after him with the irresistible force of a torrent that is bursting its dykes.

Very different from the Texans, whose camp had so easily been invaded, the Mexicans were not asleep. By orders of the commandant, so soon as he had left the hacienda the whole garrison got under arms, and fell in in the patio, ready, if need was, to go immediately to the aid of the expeditionary corps. Still, they were so far from expecting an attack, especially in this manner, that the sudden apparition of this band of demons, who seemed to have ascended from the infernal regions, caused them extraordinary surprise and terror.

The Texans, skilfully profiting by the terror their presence caused, redoubled their efforts to render it impossible for their enemies to offer any lengthened resistance. But, shut up as they were in a court without an outlet, the very

impossibility of flight gave the Mexicans the necessary courage to rally and fight courageously. Collected round their officers, who encouraged them by voice and example, they resolved to do their duty manfully, and the combat began with terrible obstinacy.

It was at this moment that Colonel Melendez and the soldiers who followed him burst into the patio, and by their presence were on the point of restoring to their party the victory which was slipping from them. Unfortunately, this success arrived too late: the Mexicans, surrounded by the Texans, were compelled, after a desperate resistance and prodigies of valour, to lay down their arms, and surrender at discretion.

For the second time Don Juan Melendez was prisoner to the Jaguar. As on the first occasion, he was compelled to break his sword, conquered by fatality rather than by his fortunate enemy.

The preliminaries of the surrender had scarce been agreed on between the two leaders ere piercing cries were suddenly heard from the building occupied by the women. Almost immediately the White Scalper, who had been lost out of sight during the excitement of the combat, emerged from these buildings bearing across his shoulders a woman whose long hair trailed on the ground. The old man's eyes flashed, and foam came from his mouth. In his right hand he brandished his rifle, which he held by the barrel, and fell back step by step, like a tiger at bay, before those who tried in vain to bar his passage.

"My daughter!" Tranquil shrieked.

He had recognised Carmela; the poor child had fainted, and seemed dead. The colonel and the Jaguar had also recognised the maiden, and by a common impulse hurried to her aid.

The White Scalper, recoiling step by step before the cloud of enemies that surrounded him, did not reply a word to the insults poured upon him. He laughed a dry laugh, and whenever an assailant came too near him, raised his terrible club, and the man rolled to the ground.

The hunters and the two young men, recognising the impossibility of striking this man without running the risk of wounding her they wished to save, contented themselves with gradually narrowing the circle round him, so as to drive him into a corner of the court, where they would be enabled to seize him. But the ferocious old man foiled their calculations; he suddenly bounded forward, overthrew those who opposed his passage, and climbed with headlong speed up the steps leading to the platform. On reaching the latter, he turned once again to his startled enemies, burst into a hoarse laugh, and leaped over the breast-work into the river, bearing with him the young girl, of whom he had not loosed his hold.

When the witnesses of this extraordinary act had recovered from the stupor into which it threw them, and rushed on the platform, their anxious glances in vain interrogated the river—the waters had resumed their ordinary limpidness. White Scalper had disappeared with the unhappy victim whom he had so audaciously carried off. To accomplish this unheard-of deed he had surrendered the Larch-tree hacienda to the Texan army. What motive had impelled the strange man to this extraordinary action?

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CONSPIRATORS.

WE will now momentarily quit the Indian border, on the skirt of which our story has hitherto passed, and leaping over about two hundred miles, beg the reader to follow us to Galveston, four months after the events we chronicled in our last chapter.

At the period when our story is laid, that city, in which General Lallemand wished to found the *Champ d'Asyls*—that sublime Utopia of a noble and broken heart—was far from that commercial prosperity which the progress of civilisation, successive immigrations, and, most of all, the speculations of bold capitalists, have caused it to attain during the last few years.

Galveston is built on the small sandy islet of St. Louis, which closes up the mouth of the Rio Trinidad. At that time the houses were low, built of wood, and surrounded by gardens planted with fragrant trees, which impregnated the atmosphere with delicious odours.

Unfortunately there is one thing that cannot alter—the climate and the nature of the soil. The suffocating heat that in summer prevails in the town corrodes the earth and changes it into an impalpable dust, in which you sink up to the knees, and which, at the least breath of air, penetrates into the eyes, mouth, and nostrils; myriads of mosquitos, whose stings are extremely painful, and, above all, the bad quality of the water, which the inhabitants collect with great difficulty in plank reservoirs during the rainy season, and which the sun renders boiling—these grievous occurrences, especially for Europeans, render a residence at Galveston insupportable at times.

About four in the afternoon, at the moment when the rising sea-breeze began to refresh the atmosphere, a little Indian canoe, made of beech bark, left the mainland, and, vigorously impelled by two men supplied with wide sculls, proceeded toward the city and pulled alongside the plank quay, which served at the time as the landing-place. So soon as the canoe was stationary, a third person, carelessly reclining in the stern sheets, rose, looked round him as if to recognise the spot where he was; then, taking a spring, landed on the quay. The canoe immediately turned round, though not a syllable had been exchanged between the scullers and the passenger they had brought.

The latter then pulled his hat over his eyes, wrapped himself carefully in the folds of a wide zarapé of Indian fabric and striking colour, and proceeded hastily towards the centre of the city. After a walk of a few minutes the stranger stopped in front of a house, whose comfortable appearance and well-tended garden showed that it belonged to a person who, if not rich, was in easy circumstances. The door was ajar; the stranger pushed it, entered, and closed it after him; then, without any hesitation, like a man sure of what he was about, he crossed the garden, in which he met nobody, entered the passage of the house, turned to the right, and found himself in a room modestly though comfortably furnished.

On reaching this room the stranger fell into a butacca with the air of a tired man delighted to rest after a long journey, took off his zarapé, which he placed on the equipal, threw his hat upon it, and then, when he had made himself comfortable, he rolled a husk cigarette, struck a light with a gold

mechero he took from his pocket, lit his papelito, and was soon surrounded by a dense cloud of bluish and fragrant smoke, which rose above his head and formed a species of halo.

The stranger threw his body back, half closed his eyes, and fell into that gentle ecstasy which the Italians call the *dolce far niente*, the Turks, *kief*, and for which we northerns, with our more powerful constitutions, have found no name, for the simple reason that we do not know it.

The stranger had reached about the half of his second cigarette when another person entered the room. This man, who did not appear to take the slightest notice of the previous arrival, behaved, however, precisely as he had done: he also took off his zarapé, reclined on a butacca, and lit up a cigarette. Presently the garden sand creaked beneath the footsteps of a third visitor, followed immediately by a fourth, and then by a fifth: in short, at the end of an hour twenty persons were assembled in this room. They all smoked with apparent carelessness, and since their arrival had not exchanged a syllable.

Six o'clock struck from a clock standing on a sideboard. The last stroke of the hour had scarce ceased vibrating ere the company, as if by common agreement, threw away their cigars, and rose with a vivacity that certainly was little to be expected after their previous carelessness. At the same moment a secret door opened in the wall, and a man appeared on the threshold.

This man was tall, elegant, and aristocratic, and appeared to be young. A half-mask of velvet concealed the upper part of his face; as for his attire, it was exactly similar to that of the other persons in the room, but a brace of long pistols and a dagger were passed through the girdle of red China crape which was wound tightly round his waist. At the appearance of the stranger a quiver ran, like an electric current, through the lines of visitors. The masked man, with head erect, arms crossed on his chest, and body haughtily thrown back, gave his audience a glance, which could be seen flashing through the holes in the velvet.

"It is well," he at length said, in a sonorous voice; "you are faithful to your promise, not one of you has kept us waiting. This is the eighth time I have assembled you during the month, and each time I have found you equally prompt and faithful; thanks, in the name of our country."

His auditors bowed silently, and the stranger continued, after a slight pause—

"Time presses, gentlemen; the situation is growing with each moment more serious; the hour has arrived to stake our heads resolutely in a glorious and decisive game. Are you ready?"

"We are," they all answered unanimously.

"Reflect once more before pledging yourself further," the mask continued in a thrilling voice: "this time I repeat to you, we shall take the bull by the horns, but of one hundred chances, ninety-eight are against us."

"No matter," the person who first entered the room said, haughtily; "if two chances are left us, they will be sufficient."

"I expected no less from you, John Davis," the stranger said; "you have ever been full of devotion and self-denial; but, perhaps among our comrades some may not think as you do. I do not regard this as a crime, for a man may love his country and yet not consent to sacrifice his life to it without regret; still, I must have perfect confidence in those who follow me; they and I must have but one heart and one thought. Let those, then, who feel a repugnance to share in the task we have to perform to-night withdraw."

There was silence, but no one stirred.

"Come," the stranger said, with an expression of joy, "I was not mistaken; you are brave fellows."

"By heaven!" said John Davis, "the trial was useless; you ought to have known long ago what we are."

"Certainly I knew it, but my honour commanded me to act as I have done. Now, all is said: we shall succeed or perish together.

"Very good, that is what I call speaking," the ex-slave-dealer said, with a hearty laugh; "the partizans of Santa Anna must have to hold their own; for, if I am not greatly mistaken, ere long we shall cut them into stirrup-leathers."

At this moment a shrill whistle, although rather remote, was heard: a second whistle, still nearer, replied.

"Gentlemen," the stranger said, "we are warned of the approach of an enemy; and the interest of the cause we defend imperiously ordains prudence. Follow John Davis, while I receive the fellow who is intruding on us."

"Come," said the American.

The conspirators, for they were no other, displayed some hesitation, for they felt a repugnance to hide.

"Leave me," the stranger went on; "you must."

All bowed and left the room after John Davis by the secret door, which had offered passage to their chief, and which closed upon them without displaying a sign of its existence, as it was so carefully hidden in the wall. A third whistle, close by, was heard at this moment.

"Yes, yes," the chief said, with a smile, "whoever you may be, you can come now; if you possessed the craft of the opossum and the eyes of the eagle, I defy you to discover anything suspicious here."

He took off his mask, concealed his weapons, and lay back in a butacca. Almost immediately the doors opened, and a man appeared. It was Lanzi, the half-breed; he was dressed like the sailors of the port, with canvas trousers drawn in round the hips, a white shirt, with a blue turned-down collar with a white edging, and a tarpaulin hat.

"Well," the chief asked, without turning, "why did you warn us, Lanzi?"

"The governor is coming hither with several officers and a company of soldiers."

"Hang it!" the conspirator said; "are we threatened with a domiciliary visit?"

"You will soon know, for I hear him."

"Very good; we shall see what they want of us. In the meantime take this mask and these weapons."

"The weapons too?" the other said in surprise.

"What shall I do with them? That is not the way in which I must fight them at this moment. Be off."

The man took the mask and the pistols, pressed a spring, and disappeared. The gravel could now be heard creaking under the footsteps of several persons. At length the door of the saloon was thrown open, and the general entered, followed by four or five officers, who, like himself, were in full dress. The general stopped on the threshold, and took a piercing glance around; the chief was standing motionless in the centre of the apartment.

General Rubio was a thorough man of the world. He bowed politely, and apologised for having thus entered the house without being announced.

"These excuses are useless, caballero," the young man answered; "the Mexican government has for a long time accustomed us to its unceremonious way of behaving."

"Your remarks, caballero," the general answered, "breathe an irritation that must be regretted. The state of effervescence in which Texas is at this

moment would be more than sufficient to justify the unusual steps I am taking htiw you."

"I know not to what you are pleased to allude, senor general," the young man remarked, coldly; "it is possible that Texas may be in a state of é'ervescence, and the annoyances the government have put on it would completely justify this; but as concerns myself, personally, I might perhaps have a right to complain of seeing my house invaded by an armed force."

"Are you quite sure that I have not the right to act as I am doing? Do you consider yourself so free from suspicion that you regard this measure as arbitrary?"

"I repeat to you, caballero," the young man continued, haughtily, "that I do not at all understand the language you do me the honour of addressing to me. I am a peaceable citizen; nothing in my conduct has, as far as I know, aroused the jealous solicitude of the government; but you have force on your side, general, so do as you think proper; I am alone here, and shall not attempt in any way to resist the measures you may think proper to take."

"That language, caballero, evidently comes from a man assured of his safety."

"It is that of a free man, unjustly insulted."

"It may be so, but I shall not discuss the point. You will permit me, however, to remark, that for a man so justly indignant, and apparently solitary, you are very carefully guarded; for if the house be empty, as you state, the environs are guarded by friends of yours, who, I must allow, perform admirably the commission with which they were intrusted, by warning you sufficiently early of unexpected visits."

"Instead of speaking in enigmas, general, it would be better, perhaps, to have an explanation; then I might attempt to defend myself."

"Nothing is more easy, caballero; still, you will allow me to remark that we have been talking together for some time, and you have not yet offered me a chair."

"Why should I employ toward you those conventional forms of politeness, general? From the moment when, without my authority, and against my will, you introduced yourself into this house, you should have considered yourself as quite at home."

"Caballero," the general answered, "I am grieved to find in you this stiffness and determination to quarrel. When I entered this house, my intentions with respect to you were, perhaps, not so hostile as you suppose; but, since you force me to a clear and categorical explanation, I am prepared to satisfy you, and prove to you that I am acquainted not only with your conduct, but with the plans you entertain and are carrying out, with a tenacity and boldness which, if I did not take measures to stop them, would inevitably lead to their speedy realisation."

The young man started, and a flash burst from his wild eye at this insinuation, which revealed to him the danger with which he was menaced; but immediately regaining his presence of mind, he replied, coolly—

"I am listening to you, general."

The latter turned to his officers.

"Do as I do, senores," he said, as he sat down; "take seats, as this caballero refuses to offer them to us."

The officers bowed, and seated themselves comfortably on the butaccas with which the apartment was furnished. The general continued—

"And in the first place, to proceed regularly, and prove to you that I am well-informed of all that concerns you," he said, purposely laying a stress on the words, "I will begin by telling you your name."

"In truth, you should have begun with that."

"You are," the general went on, "the chief whom the insurgents have christened the Jaguar."

"Ah, ah!" he remarked, ironically, "so you know that, *senor* governor?"

"And a good many more things, as you shall see."

"Go on," he said, smiling.

"After giving a powerful organisation to your revolt on the Indian border by seizing the Larch-tree hacienda, and allying yourself with certain Comanche and Apache tribes, you understood that, to succeed, you must give up that guerilla warfare, which I confess you had carried on for some time with considerable success."

"Thanks," said the Jaguar, with an ironical bow.

"You therefore entrusted the temporary command of your bands to one of your comrades, and yourself came into the heart of Texas, with your most faithful associates, in order to revolutionise the coast, and deal a great blow by seizing a seaport. Galveston, by its position, is a strategical point of the utmost importance for your plans. For two months past you have been concealed in this house, which you have made your head-quarters, and where you are making all the preparations for the audacious enterprise you wish to attempt. You have at your disposal numerous emissaries and faithful conspirators; the government of the United States supply you with abundance of arms and ammunition, which you think you will soon have need of. Your measures have been so well taken, and your machinations carried on with such great skill; you fancy yourself so nearly on the point of success, that hardly an hour back you convened here the principal members of your party, in order to give them their final instructions. Is it so? Am I correctly informed?"

"What would you have me answer, *caballero*," the young man said, "since you know all?"

"Then, you confess that you are the Jaguar, the chief of the freebooters!"

"Canarios, I should think so."

"You also allow that you came here with the intention of seizing the city?"

"Incontestably," the other said, with an air of mockery; "it does not allow the shadow of a doubt."

"Take care," the general remarked drily; "it is a much more serious matter than you seem to think."

"What the deuce would you have me do, general? it is not my fault that I am beginning to doubt my own identity, and I ask myself if I have not been hitherto deceived in believing myself Martin Gutierrez, the ranchero of Santa Aldegonida, in the state of Sonora, and if I am not, on the contrary, the ferocious Jaguar, of whom you speak to me, and for whom you do me the honour of taking me. I confess to you, general, that all this perplexes me in the highest degree."

"Then, *caballero*, up to the present you have been jesting!" the general said hastily.

The Jaguar began laughing.

"*Cuerpo de Cristo!*" he replied, "I should think so. What else could I do in the face of such accusations? Discuss them with you? You know as well as I do, general, that it is useless to attempt to overthrow a conviction. Instead of telling me that I am the Jaguar, prove it to me, and then I will bow to the truth."

"I hope to be able to satisfy you."

"Very good; but till then, I would observe that you entered my house in a

way contrary to law, that the domicile of a citizen is inviolable, and that what you have done to-day, only a juez de letras, armed with a legal warrant, was empowered to do."

"You would possibly be correct, caballero, if we lived in ordinary times; but the state is in a state of siege, the military power has taken the place of the civil authority, and alone has the right to command and have carried out those measures that relate to the maintenance of order."

The young man, while the general was speaking, had taken a side glance at the clock.

"Be kind enough," he said, "to explain to me categorically, and without further circumlocution, the motives for your presence in my house; we have been talking a long time, and I have not yet been able to read your intentions. I should therefore feel obliged by your making them known to me without delay, as important business claims my presence abroad."

"Oh, oh! you will soon change your tone," the general said, with a little irony; "I will tell you what you desire to learn; as for your leaving the house without my sanction, I fancy you will find it rather difficult."

"Which means, I presume, that you look upon me as a prisoner, general?"

"Nearly so, caballero. When your house has been searched, I may, perhaps, permit you to be put aboard a ship, which will carry you far away from the territory of the Mexican confederation."

"Canarios, senior general, I see that your government has preserved the healthy Spanish traditions, and is deliciously arbitrary," the Jaguar said mockingly; "the only question is, whether I shall voluntarily submit to such treatment."

"You must have already perceived that force is not on your side, at least for the present."

"Then you will employ force to coerce a single, unarmed man in his own house?"

"That is my intention."

"Oh! if that be so, I thank you, for you leave me free to act."

"What do you mean by that remark, caballero?"

"What do you mean by yours, senior governor? I consider that all means are good to escape arbitrary arrest, and I shall employ them without hesitation."

"Try it," the officer said, ironically.

"When the moment for action arrives, I shall not wait for your permission to do so," the Jaguar replied.

The tone in which the Jaguar uttered his last words caused the general a moment's anxiety; but after taking a glance round him, he was reassured. In fact, owing to the precautions taken by the old soldier, it seemed materially impossible that his prisoner could escape, for he was alone, unarmed, in a house surrounded by soldiers, and watched by several resolute officers.

"I absolve you beforehand," he said disdainfully, "for any efforts you may make to escape."

"I thank you, general," the Jaguar answered, with a ceremonious bow.

"I expect nothing else from your courtesy; I make a note of your promise."

"Be it so. Now, with your permission we are about to make our domiciliary visit."

"Do so, general, pray do so; if you desire it, I will myself act as your guide."

"In my turn, I thank you for this obliging offer, but I do not wish to put your kindness to a trial; the more so, as I am thoroughly acquainted with this house."

"Do you think so, general?"

"Judge for yourself."

The Jaguar bowed without replying, and carelessly leant his elbow on the couch upon which the clock stood.

"We will first begin with this saloon," the general continued.

"You mean that you will finish with it," the young man remarked, with an ironical smile.

"Let us look first at the secret door in the wall."

"I see, you are better informed than I supposed."

"You do not know all yet."

"I hope so; judging from the commencement, I expect some extraordinary discoveries."

"Perhaps so. Will you make the spring work yourself, caballero, or would you prefer my doing it?"

"On my word, general, I confess that all this interests me so hugely that, until fresh orders, I desire to remain a simple spectator."

"Pay attention, caballero," the general said in a menacing tone; "I know that when I arrived you had a large party here; on my entrance your comrades fled."

"That is true," the young man said.

"Take care," the general continued; "if assassins are concealed, the blood will fall on your head."

"General," the Jaguar said seriously, "press the spring: the passage is empty; I require no aid but my own to deliver myself from your clutches."

The governor no longer hesitated; he walked resolutely to the wall, and pressed the spring; his officers had followed him, ready to aid him if any danger presented itself. The Jaguar did not stir. The door opened, and displayed a long and completely deserted corridor.

"Well, general, have I kept my word?" the Jaguar said.

"Yes, senor, I must concede it. Now, caballeros," the general continued, addressing his officers, "draw swords, and forward!"

"One moment, if you please," said the Jaguar.

"What do you want, senor?"

"You will remember that I warned you you would end your domiciliary visit with this room?"

"Well?"

"I will keep that second promise as I did the first."

At the same instant, and ere the general and his officers could account for what was happening, the flooring gave way beneath their feet, and they rolled to the bottom of a vault.

"A pleasant journey!" the Jaguar said with a laugh, as he closed the trap again.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SPY.

WHILE these events were occurring, the sun had set, and night almost immediately succeeded day. So soon as the Jaguar had closed the trap, he proceeded towards the masked door to rejoin his comrades; but a sound of footsteps out-

side made him change his plans; he shut the door again, and returned to his old position. The stranger did not delay long. Although the night was too dark to allow the Jaguar to recognise his features, by the sparkling of his gold lace, and the clank of his spurs and steel scabbard on the pavement, he saw that he was once more in the presence of a Mexican officer of rank. At the end of a moment, however, the Jaguar's eyes, gifted possibly with that precious quality possessed by animals of the feline race to see through the darkness, appeared to have recognised the stranger.

The young man frowned, and gave a start of disappointment.

"Is there no one here?" the officer asked.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" the Jaguar answered, disguising his voice.

"That is a curious question," the officer continued; "first have this room lighted up, which looks like a cut-throat's den, and then we will talk."

"It is not necessary for what we have to say to each other; you can leave your sabre at rest; although this house is dark, it is no cut-throat den."

"What has become of General Rubio and the officers who accompanied him?"

"Am I their keeper, Colonel Melendez?"

"Who are you, who appear to know me and answer so strangely?"

"Perhaps a friend, vexed at seeing you here, and who would be glad were you elsewhere."

"A friend would not hide himself."

"Why not, if circumstances compel him?"

"A truce to this exchange of peurile speeches; will you answer my question, yes or no?"

"Suppose I refuse?"

"I shall know how to compel you."

"That is haughty language, colonel."

"Which I shall support by deeds."

"I do not think so: not that I doubt your courage—Heaven forbid, for I have long known it."

"Well! what will prevent me?"

"You have not the means to carry out your wishes."

"They are easily found."

"Try it."

While speaking, the colonel had mechanically taken a couple of steps into the room.

"I shall soon return," he said, as he laid his hand on the door-latch.

The Jaguar only answered by a hoarse laugh. The door was closed; in vain did the colonel try to open it.

"I am your prisoner, then?" he said, addressing the young man.

"Perhaps so; it will depend on yourself."

"You wish me to fall into the same snare into which the general and his officers probably fell before me. Try it, senor; still, I warn you that I am on my guard, and will defend myself."

"Your words are harsh, colonel. You gratuitously insult a man of whom, up to the present, you have no cause to complain, and whom you will regret having attacked when you know him."

"Tell me the fate of my companions, and what your intentions are with regard to myself."

"My intentions are better than yours, colonel; for, if you had me in your power, as I have you in mine, it is probable that your general, if not yourself,

would make me pay dearly for the imprudence I have committed. General Rubio and his officers are my prisoners, and you feel in your heart that I can do what I please with you; withdraw the soldiers who surround my house, pledge me your word of honour that no attempt shall be made on me for four-and-twenty hours, and I will immediately restore you all to liberty."

"I know not who you are, *senor*; the conditions you wish to impose on me are those of a conqueror."

"What else am I at this moment?" the young man interrupted violently.

"Be it so; but I cannot take it on myself to accept or decline these conditions, as the general alone has the right to form a determination and pledge his word."

"Then ask himself what his intentions are, and he will answer you."

"Is he here, then?" the colonel exclaimed eagerly.

"It is of little consequence to you where he is, provided he hear and answer you; do not stir from where you are; one step further, and you are a dead man; what is your resolve?"

"I accept."

"In that case speak to him."

The Jaguar worked the spring that opened the trap, and displayed the entrance of the vault into which the Mexican officers had been so suddenly hurled; but the darkness was so intense that the colonel could perceive nothing, in spite of his efforts to try and distinguish a gleam; he merely heard a slight sound produced by the grating of the trap in its groove. The colonel understood that he must get out of the difficulty as well as he could.

"General," he said, "can you hear me?"

"Who speaks?" the general answered immediately.

"I, Colonel Melendez de Gongora."

"Heaven be praised!" the general shouted; "in that case all goes well."

"On the contrary; like yourself, I am in the hands of the accursed insurgents."

"*Mil demonios!*" the old soldier shouted angrily.

"Are you all right?"

"Bodily, yes; my officers and myself have received no wounds; I must confess that the demon who played us this trick was so far civil."

"Thanks, general," the Jaguar said.

"Ah, *salteador*," the angry general exclaimed; "I swear by Heaven to settle our accounts some day."

"I hope so too; but at present, believe me, you had better listen to what Colonel Melendez has to say to you."

"I suppose I must," the governor muttered. "Speak, colonel," he added aloud.

"General, we are offered our liberty on condition," the colonel immediately replied, "that we pledge our word of honour to attempt nothing against the man whose prisoner we are."

"Or against his adherents, whoever they may be."

"Be it so; or against his adherents, during the next twenty-four hours, and that the house shall be left free."

"But supposing I *do* refuse?"

"In that case, I will treat you and yours exactly as you intended to treat me and mine."

"That is to say?"

"You will be all shot within a quarter of an hour."

There was a mournful silence. No other sound could be heard but the dry

and monotonous one produced by the escapement of the clock. These men, collected without seeing each other, in so narrow a space, felt their hearts beat as if to burst their chests; they trembled with impotent rage, for they recognised that they were really in the hands of an implacable foe.

"Viva Dios!" the colonel shouted; "better to die than surrender thus!"

And he rushed forward with uplifted sabre. Suddenly a hand of iron clutched him, threw him down, and he felt the point of his own sword, which he had let fall, slightly prick his throat.

"Surrender, or you are a dead man," a rough voice shouted in his ear.

"No; mil demonios!" the colonel said, furiously: "I will not surrender to a bandit; kill me."

"Stop," the Jaguar said: "I insist."

The man who held the colonel down left him at liberty, and the latter rose, ashamed and partly stunned.

"Well," the young man continued, "do you accept, general?"

"Yes, demon," the latter replied passionately; "but I shall revenge myself."

"Then, you give me your word as a soldier that the conditions I impose on you will be carried out by you?"

"I give it; but who guarantees me that you will act honourably on your side?"

"My honour, general," the Jaguar answered; "my honour, which, as you know, is as unsullied as your own."

"Very good, senor; I trust to you as you do to me. Must we surrender our swords?"

"General," the Jaguar answered nobly, "a brave soldier never separates from his weapons; I should blush to deprive you of yours."

"Thanks for that courtesy, caballero, for it proves to me that every good feeling is not dead in your heart. Now I am waiting for you to supply me with the means for leaving the place into which you made me fall."

"You shall be satisfied, senor general. As for you, colonel, you can retire, for the door is now open."

"Not before I have seen you," the officer answered.

"What good would that do, since you have not recognised me?" the young man said.

"The Jaguar!" the colonel ejaculated in surprise. "Ah! I might have expected that; I shall certainly remain now," he added, with a singular inflection in his voice.

"Very good," said the chief, "remain."

He clapped his hands, and four peons entered with lighted candelabra. So soon as the saloon was lit up, the young officer perceived the general and his aides-de-camp standing up in the vault. A criado brought a ladder to the trap, and the Mexicans ascended—half-pleased, half-ashamed.

"Gentlemen," the insurgent continued, "you are free. Any other in my place would, doubtless, have profited by the bad position in which you were, to impose on you conditions far harder than those I demanded of you; but I only understand a fair fight, steel against steel, chest against chest. Go in peace."

"One word before separating," said the general.

"I listen, caballero."

"Whatever may be the circumstances under which we may meet at a later date, I shall not forget your conduct of this day."

"I dispense you from any gratitude on that account, general; the more so, because if I acted thus it was for reasons entirely strange to you."

"Whatever be the motive of your conduct, my honour urges me to remember your conduct."

"As you please; I only ask you to remember our conditions."

"They shall be punctually carried out."

The Jaguar, upon this, bowed to the general; the latter returned his salute, and making a sign to his officers to follow him, left the room. The young chief listened attentively to the sound of the retiring footsteps, and then drew himself up.

"What!" he exclaimed with surprise, on perceiving the colonel, "are you still here, Senor Don Juan?"

"Yes, brother," the latter answered, in a sad voice, "I am still here."

The Jaguar walked rapidly up to him, and took his hand.

"Listen, brother; this situation cannot endure long; whatever happens, it must cease. Time fails me at this moment to explain to you certain matters you ought to know; but we will meet to-morrow."

"Where, and at what hour?"

"At the Salto del Frayle, at two in the afternoon."

"Why so far and so late, brother?"

"Because between this and then something will happen, which I cannot tell at present, but which will doubtless oblige me to cross the bay and seek shelter on the mainland."

"'Tis a long way off, but I will keep the appointment. Good-bye, brother, until to-morrow."

"Death alone can prevent me being at the place of meeting I have selected."

The two political enemies, so cordially attached, shook hands and separated. The colonel wrapped himself in his cloak, and immediately left the room and the house. The Jaguar, as soon as he was alone, closed the trap-door, touched the spring of the secret door, and left the saloon in his turn, to enter the dark corridor through which, on the general's entrance, his friends had disappeared at the heels of John Davis. This passage, after several turnings, opened into a rather large room, in which all the conspirators were assembled, silent and gloomy, waiting, with their hands on their weapons.

Lanzi was standing sentry in the doorway, to prevent any surprise: the Jaguar resumed his mask, thrust his pistols in his girdle, and entered. On seeing him, the conspirators gave a start of joy, which was immediately suppressed, however, at a signal from the young man.

"My comrades," he said, in a saddened voice, "I have evil tidings to communicate to you. Had not my measures been so well taken, we should all have been prisoners at this moment. A traitor has slipped in among us, and this man has given the governor the most detailed and positive information about our projects. A miracle has alone saved us."

A shudder of indignation ran through the ranks of the conspirators; by an instinctive movement they separated, giving each other sinister glances, and laying their hands on their weapons. The vast hall, only lighted by a smoky lamp, whose reddish light threw strange reflections at each breath of air on the energetic faces of the conspirators, had a mournful and yet striking aspect.

At this moment a man burst through the conspirators, thrusting back right and left those who barred his passage, and placed himself opposite the young chief.

"Listen," he said, turning to his comrades, "and let what you are about to hear form a profitable lesson to you:—The man who revealed the secret of your meetings to the governor, the man who sold you, the man, in a word, who wished to give you up, I know!"

"His name, his name!" all the conspirators shouted.

"Silence!" the Jaguar ordered; "allow our comrade to speak."

"Do not give me that name, Jaguar, for I am not your comrade, and never

was. I am your enemy, not your personal enemy, for I do not know you ; but the enemy of every man who tries to tear from the Mexican Republic that Texas where I was born, and which is the most brilliant gem of the union. It was I, I alone who sold you, I, Lopez Hidalgo d'Avila, but not in the cowardly way you suppose, for when the moment arrived for me to make myself known to you, I had sworn to do so ; now you know all, and I am in your power. There are my weapons," he added, as he threw them disdainfully on the ground ; " I shall not resist, and you can do with me as you please."

After uttering these words with a haughty accent impossible to render, Don Lopez Hidalgo proudly crossed his arms on his chest, drew up his head, and waited. The conspirators had listened to this strange revelation with an indignation and rage that attained such a pitch of violence that their will was, so to speak, paralysed, and in spite of themselves they remained motionless. But so soon as Don Lopez had finished speaking, their feelings suddenly burst out, and they rushed upon him with tiger-yells.

" Stay, stay ! " the Jaguar shouted, as he rushed forward and made of his own person a rampart for the man on whom twenty daggers were lifted ; " stay, brothers ; as this man has said, he is in our power, and cannot escape us ; although his blood be that of a traitor, let us not commit an assassination, but try him."

" Yes, yes," the conspirators yelled ; " let us try him."

" Silence," the Jaguar ordered ; and then, turning to Don Lopez Hidalgo, who, during their proceedings, had remained as calm and quiet as if he were a stranger to what was going on ; " will you answer frankly the questions I ask you ? " he inquired.

" Yes," Don Lopez simply replied.

" Was it pure love of your country, as you call it, that urged you to pretend to be one of us in order to betray us more securely, or was it not rather the hope of a rich reward ? "

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders with disdain.

" I am as rich as the whole of you put together," he replied ; " who does not know the wealthy Don Lopez Hidalgo d'Avila ? "

" That is true," one said ; " this man, I am bound to allow, for I have been acquainted with him for years, does not know the amount of his fortune."

The Jaguar's forehead was wrinkled by the effect of a little thought.

" Then that noble and revered feeling, the love of one's country, instead of elevating your soul and making generous feelings spring up in it," he continued, " has made you a coward. Instead of fighting honestly and loyally in the daylight against us, you followed the gloomy path of espial to betray us."

" I only picked up the weapon yourselves offered me. Did you fight, pray, in the open day ? No, you conspired craftily in the darkness ; like the mole, you dug the underground mine that was to swallow us up, and I countermined you. But what use is discussion ? for you will no more comprehend my assertions than I can yours.—Now to the business, for I am convinced that is the only point on which we shall agree."

" One moment, Don Lopez ; explain to me the reason why, when no suspicion pointed to you, you denounced yourself, and trusted to our mercy ? "

" Although unseen, I overheard what passed between you and your governor," the Mexican coldly answered ; " I saw in what way the perilous position in which I had succeeded in placing you turned to your advantage ; I understood that all was lost, and did not wish to survive our defeat."

" Then you know the conditions I imposed on General Rubio ? "

" And which he was constrained to accept. Yes, I know them ; I am aware

also, that you are too clever and determined a man not to profit by the twenty-four hours' respite which you have so adroitly gained."

"Good! That is all I wished to know. When you entered our association you accepted all the laws?"

"I did so."

The Jaguar turned to the conspirators, who had listened, panting with fury and impatience, to this singular dialogue.

"Brothers," he said, "you have heard all that passed between Don Lopez Hidalgo d'Avila and myself?"

"Yes," they answered.

"On your soul and conscience, is this man guilty?"

"He is guilty," they burst forth.

"What punishment does he deserve?"

"Death!"

"You hear, Don Lopez; your brethren condemn you."

"I thank them; that favour is the only one I hoped and desired to receive from them."

There was a moment of supreme silence; all eyes were fixed on the Jaguar, who, with his head hanging on his breast, and frowning brows, seemed plunged in serious thought. Suddenly the young man raised his head; a lightning glance flashed from his eyes, a strange smile curled his lip, and he said, with a tone of bitter irony—

"Your brethren have condemned you to die; well, I, their chief, condemn you to live!"

Don Lopez, despite all his courage, felt himself turn pale at these cutting words; he instinctively stooped to pick up the weapons he had previously hurled at his feet; but the Jaguar guessed his thoughts.

"Seize that man!" he shouted.

John Davis and two or three other conspirators rushed on the Mexican, and, in spite of his active resistance, soon rendered him powerless.

"Bind him," the Jaguar next ordered.

"Don Lopez Hidalgo d'Avila," the Jaguar continued, when he was obeyed, in a hollow voice, "traitor to your brothers, your false tongue will be plucked out and your ears cut off. Such is the sentence which I, the chief of the Freebooters, pass on you; and in order that everybody may know that you are a traitor, a T will be cut on your forehead, between your eyebrows."

This sentence caused a momentary stupor among the company; but soon a tiger-like yell burst from all their panting chests, and it was with a tremor of ferocious joy that these men prepared to carry out the atrocious sentence pronounced by their chief. The prisoner struggled in vain to burst the bonds that held him. In vain he demanded death with loud cries. As the Jaguar had said, the lion's paw was on him; the conspirators were inexorable, and the sentence was carried out in all its rigour.

An hour later Don Lopez Hidalgo d'Avila, bleeding and mutilated, was deposited at the door of the governor's palace. On his chest was fastened a large placard, on which were written in blood the two words—

Cobarde! Traidor!

After this fearful execution, the conspirators continued their meeting as if nothing extraordinary had interrupted them. But the Jaguar's revenge was foiled—at least partially; for when the unhappy victim was picked up at day-break, he was dead. Don Lopez had found the strength and courage to dash out his brains against the wall.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PULQUERIA.

THE same day on which we resume our narrative, on the firing of the cannon from the fort that commands the entrance to the port of Galveston, to announce the setting of the sun, whose glowing disc had just disappeared in the sea, colouring the horizon with a ruddy hue for a long distance, the town, which had during the day been plunged into a mournful torpor owing to the heat, woke up all at once with lengthened and joyous clamour.

The streets, hitherto solitary, were peopled as if by enchantment by an immense crowd, which emerged in disorder from all the houses, so eager were they to breathe the fresh air of evening which the sea-breeze brought up on its humid wing. The shops were opened, and lit up with an infinite number of coloured paper lamps.

Two young gentlemen, dressed in the simple but graceful uniform of officers of the United States navy, who were coming from the interior of the town, forced their way with some difficulty through the crowd that impeded their every step on the port, as they proceeded toward the pier, where a large number of boats of all shapes and sizes were tied up. They had scarce reached the landing-place ere they were surrounded by some twenty boatmen, who offered their services, while exaggerating in their praiseworthy fashion the surprising qualities and unparalleled speed of their boats.

After giving a careless glance at the numerous skiffs dancing before them, the officers abruptly dismissed the boatmen by peremptorily declining their services; but they did not get rid of them till they had told them they had a boat of their own, and scattered some small change among them.

We have said that the sun had set for some time, and hence the night was gloomy. Still the two officers, in order doubtless to assure themselves that the darkness concealed no spy, walked several times up and down the jetty, while conversing together in a low voice, and examining with the most scrupulous attention those spots which might have afforded shelter to any one. They were certainly alone. One of them then drew from his breast one of those silver whistles such as boatswains employ on board ships, and then produced a soft and prolonged note thrice repeated. A few moments passed, and nothing proved to the officers that their signal had been heard. At last, a soft whistle traversed the air and expired on the ears of the two men who were listening, with bodies bent forward, and faces turned to the sea.

"They are coming," said one.

"We will wait," his companion answered laconically.

They carefully wrapped themselves in their cloaks to guard themselves against the damp sea-breeze; they leant against an old gun that served to tie boats up, and remained motionless as statues, without exchanging a syllable.

At length a remote sound, scarcely perceptible, but which practised ears could recognise, rose from the sea. This sound became gradually more and more distinct; and it was easy, especially for sailors, to recognise the sharp and cadenced sound of oars striking against the tholes and dipping into the sea; although these oars were muffled, and employed with the utmost caution.

In fact, the boat itself ere long became visible. Its long black outline stood out in the luminous line traced by the moon on the waves, as it approached the

jetty at great speed. The two officers had bent forward curiously, but did not leave the post of observation they had selected. On coming within pistol-shot, the boat stopped. Suddenly, a rough voice, lowered prudently, said—

"The night is dark, it is imprudent to wander hap-hazard on the sea-shore."

"Yes, when a man is alone, and feels his heart die out in his bosom," one of the officers answered.

"Who can flatter himself with possessing a firm heart?" the voice went on.

"The man whose arm is ever ready to support his words for the defence of a good cause," the other at once replied.

"Come, come," the sailor exclaimed gaily, "lay on your oars, lads, the jaguars are out hunting."

"Take care of the coyotes," the officer said again.

The boat pulled up alongside the jetty; the officers had by this time left their place of shelter, and hurried to the end of the jetty. There a man, dressed in sailor's garb, with an oil-skin sou'wester, whose large brim concealed his features, was standing motionless, with a pistol in either hand.

"Patria!" he said sharply, when the officers were only two paces from him.

"Libertad!" they answered, without hesitation.

"Viva Dios!" the sailor said, "it is a good wind that brings you, Don Serapio, and you too, Don Cristoval."

"All the better, Ramirez," said the officer addressed as Serapio.

"Have you any news, then?" his comrade asked, curiously.

"Excellent, Don Cristoval, excellent," Ramirez answered, as he rubbed his hands gleefully.

"Oh, oh!" the two officers muttered; "tell us it, then, Ramirez."

The latter took a suspicious glance around.

"I should like to do so," he said, "but the place where we are does not seem at all propitious for conversation."

"That is true," said Don Serapio; "but what prevents us getting into your boat?"

"But," said Ramirez, "but then we should have to push off; and I am no more anxious than I presume you to be, to be discovered and hailed by some guard-boat."

"That is true," Don Cristoval objected; "we must find other and less perilous means for conversing."

"What o'clock is it?" Ramirez asked.

Don Serapio struck his repeater.

"Just ten," he answered.

"Good: in that case we have time, since the affair does not come off till midnight. Follow me. I know a pulqueria where we shall be as safe as on the top of the Coffre de Perote."

"But the boat?" Don Cristoval objected.

"Be at your ease—it is commanded by Lucas. However clever the Mexicans may be, he is the man to play at hide-and-seek with them for the entire night."

The officers bowed, but made no further remark. The three men then set out, Ramirez walking a few paces in advance of his companions. Although the night was so dark that it was impossible to distinguish objects ten paces off, the sailor proceeded through the narrow and winding streets of the town with as much certainty and ease as if traversing it in broad daylight, in the bright sunshine.

Close to the cabildo, at the corner of the Plaza Mayor, stood a species of cabin, built of ships' planks, clumsily nailed together, which offered, in the

stifling midday hours, a precarious shelter to the leperos and idlers of all sorts. It was in front of this unclean pothouse, from the broken door of which escaped a reddish steam, laden with pestilential emanations, that Ramirez stopped.

"Where the deuce are you taking us?" Don Serapio asked him, with an expression of disgust.

The sailor laid a finger on his lip.

"Silence!" he said, "you shall know. Wait for me here an instant, but be careful to keep in the shade, so as not to be seen; the customers of this honest establishment have such numerous reasons to distrust spies, that if they saw you suddenly appear among them, they might be capable of playing you a trick."

"Why enter such a den as this?"

"You will soon know; but I can tell you nothing at this moment."

"Go on, then, as it is so; still, I beg you not to keep us too long at the door of this disgusting house."

"All right, I will go in and come out again."

Then, after again recommending the officers to be prudent, he pushed the door of the pulqueria, which at once opened, and he went in. In the darkest corner of the room two men, almost completely hidden by the dense cloud of smoke that rose over the heads of the gamblers, carefully wrapped in their zarapés of Indian manufacture, with the brim of their hats pulled down over their eyes (a very needless precaution in the darkness where they were), and leaning on their long rifles, whose butts rested on the floor of the room, were whispering in each other's ear, while taking, at intervals, anxious glances at the leperos assembled a few paces from them.

The gamblers, fully engaged, did not dream of watching the strangers, who, however, from their martial demeanour, and the cleanliness of their attire, formed a striking contrast to them, and evidently did not belong to the company that usually assembled at this rancho; hence the strangers had very unnecessarily taken their precautions to escape from inquisitive looks, supposing such were their object.

Eleven o'clock struck from the cabildo; at the same moment a form appeared in the doorway. This man stopped, took a sharp glance round the room, and then, after a slight hesitation, doubtless caused by the difficulty of recognising in the crowd the persons he wished to see, he entered the rancho, and walked hastily toward the strangers. The latter turned at the sound of his footsteps, and gave a start of joy on recognising him. We need hardly say that it was Ramirez.

"Well," Ramirez asked, "what have you done?"

"Nothing," one of the men answered, "but wait."

"And those scoundrels?"

"Are already more than three parts ruined."

"All the better; they will march with greater impetuosity."

"They must soon see the bottom of their purses."

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it; they have been playing since eight in the morning, so the pulquero says."

"Without leaving off?" the sailor said, in surprise.

"They have not ceased for an instant."

"All the better."

"By-the-bye," one of the strangers remarked, "where are the men you promised to bring?"

"They are here, and you will see them in a moment."

* Very good, then it is still for this night ?

* You must know that better than I."

"Why did you not bring them in at once ?"

"I should be very sorry to do so, at least for the present. They are cool and steady naval officers, whose smile, under all circumstances, resembles a grimace, so close do they keep their lips. The free-and-easy manner of our worthy associates," he added, "might possibly displease them."

"But when the master arrives ?"

"Oh, then the affair will rest with him alone."

At the same moment a sharp whistle was heard outside, and the gamblers sprang up as if they had received an electric shock.

"Here he is," said Ramirez ; "I shall be back directly."

"Where are you going ?" one of the strangers asked.

"To join those who are waiting for me."

And winding through the groups, the sailor left the pulqueria unnoticed. Ramirez had hardly left the room, ere the door was burst open by a violent blow, and a man rushed in. All present took off their hats, as if by common agreement, and bowed respectfully.

The stranger seemed to be twenty, or two-and-twenty at the most, though he was probably older ; he was slim and delicate, but perfectly proportioned, and all his movements were marked by indescribable grace and nobility. His beardless face was surrounded by magnificent black ringlets, which escaped in profusion from under his hat, and fell in large clusters on his shoulders.

This man had a lofty and wide forehead, intelligent and pensive, and a deep and well-opened eye, an aquiline nose with flexible nostrils, and a disdainful and mocking lip. All his features made up a strange, but commanding countenance. He might be loved, but he must be feared.

Who was he ?

His best friends, and he counted many such, could not say.

He was commonly called *El Alferéz* by his friends and enemies. This word, which in Spanish literally signifies sub-lieutenant, had become the name of this singular person, which he had accepted, and to which he answered.

After taking a haughty and assured glance at the persons collected in disorderly groups around him, the young man leant against a barrel, and, with affected carelessness, said to the individuals who surrounded him—"Well, my scamps, have you amused yourselves properly ?"

A murmur of general satisfaction ran along the ranks.

"Good, my coyotes," he continued, with the same mocking tone ; "now, I suppose, you would like to smell a little blood ?"

"Yes," these sinister persons answered unanimously.

"Well, console yourselves ; I will let you smell it ere long, and in a satisfactory manner. But I do not see Ramirez among you ; can he have been so awkward as to get himself hung ? Although he has deserved it a long time, I do not think him such a fool as to let himself be apprehended by spies."

These words were uttered in a soft voice, harmoniously modulated, but at the same time sharp and rather shrill.

"I heard my name," said Ramirez, appearing.

"Yes ; are they both here ?"

"Both."

"That is excellent. Now, if the Jaguar be as true to his word as I am to mine, I answer for success."

"I hold your promise. *Señor Alferéz*," said a man who had entered the room some moments previously.

"Rayo de Dios! you and your comrades are welcome; for, of course you are not alone."

"I have twenty men, worth a hundred."

"Bravo! I recognise the Jaguar in that."

"They only await a signal from me to come in."

"Let them come; time is precious, so let us not waste it in trifling."

The Jaguar walked to the door, and threw away the lighted cigarette he held in his hand. The twenty conspirators entered, and ranged themselves silently behind their chief. Ramirez came in immediately after, followed by the two naval officers.

"All is clearly understood between us, Jaguar?"

"All."

"We act toward each other with all frankness and honesty of purpose?"

"Yes."

"You swear it?"

"Without hesitation, I swear it."

"Thanks, my friend. On my side I swear to be a faithful comrade."

"How many men have you?"

"As you see, thirty."

"Who, added to the twenty I bring, give the respectable amount of fifty men; if the affair be properly managed, they are more than we require."

"Now, let us divide our parts."

"Nothing is changed, I think; I will surprise the fort, while you board the corvette."

"Agreed; where are the guides?"

"Here," the two men said, with whom Ramirez conversed when he entered the pulqueria the first time. El Alferez examined them attentively.

"You can start, I fancy."

"How many men do you keep with you?"

"Take them all; I will only keep Ramirez and the two persons to whom he has to introduce me."

"That is true," said the sailor.

"Come, my coyotes," El Alferez continued, "follow your new chief. I place you temporarily under the orders of the Jaguar, to whom I surrender all my claims."

The men bowed, but made no reply.

"And now, brothers," the young man continued, "remember that you are about to fight for the liberty of your country, and that the man who commands you will not grudge his life for the success of the daring stroke he is about to attempt with your aid; that ought to render you invincible. Go."

"Do not forget the signal—one rocket, if we fail."

"Three if we succeed; and we shall do so, brother."

"May heaven grant it."

"Till we meet again."

The two men shook hands, and the Jaguar quitted the pulqueria, followed by these savage men, who marched silently behind him, like wild beasts going in quest of prey. Ere long, none remained in the room but the two naval officers, Ramirez, and the pulquero, who, with eyes dilated by terror, looked and listened to all this, without understanding anything. El Alferez remained motionless, with his body bent forward, so long as it was possible for him to hear the slightest sound of retiring footsteps; when all had become silent again, he drew himself up, and turned to his comrades, who were as attentive as himself.

"May heaven favour us!" he said, as he piously crossed himself. "Now caballeros, it is our turn."

"We are ready," the three men answered.

El Alferez took a rapid glance round the room. The pulquero was standing motionless in a distant corner of the room.

"Hilloh!" El Alferez said to him; "come hither."

The pulquero obsequiously doffed his straw hat, and hastened to obey.

"What do you desire, excellency?" he asked.

"Are you fond of money?"

"Well, tolerably so, excellency," he replied, with a crafty grimace.

"Very good, here is an onza: when we go away, we will give you a second; but bear in mind that you must be deaf and blind."

"That is easy," he replied, as he pocketed the gold.

Since the Jaguar's departure, the two officers had been suffering from an anxiety they did not attempt to conceal, but which El Alferez did not appear to notice, for his face was quite radiant. In fact, the expedition they were going to attempt in the company of the daring partizan seemed to them not only rash but mad.

"Come, come, senors," the young man said, with a smile, after attentively watching them for some moments, "regain your courage; hang it all, you look as if you had been buried and dug up again; and we are not dead yet, I suppose."

"That is true; but we are not much better," Don Serapio said significantly.

El Alferez frowned. "Can you be frightened?"

"We are not afraid of dying, but only of failing."

"That is my business: I answer for success."

"We are perfectly aware of what you are capable, señor; but we are only four men, and after all——"

"And the boat's crew?"

"That is true; but they are only sixteen men."

"They will be enough."

El Alferez appeared to reflect for a moment, and then addressed the pulquero, who was standing anxiously near him—"Has anything been left with you for me?" he asked him.

"Yes, excellency; this evening, at oracion, a man brought a trunk on his shoulders."

"Where is it?"

"As the man assured me that it contained articles of value, I had the chest placed in my bedroom."

"Lead me to your room."

"Whenever you please, excellency."

"Senors," El Alferez said, addressing the two naval officers and Ramirez, "wait for me in this room."

And without awaiting a reply, he made a sign to the pulquero to lead the way, and left the room with a rapid step. There was a momentary silence with the three men; they seemed to be engaged in sad thoughts, and looked anxiously around them. Time, which never stands still, had rapidly advanced during the course of the events we have narrated. Nearly the whole night had passed away, the first gleams of dawn were beginning to whiten the smoky walls of the pulqueria, and already some inhabitants, who had risen earlier than the others, were venturing into the streets.

"Day will soon be here," Don Serapio remarked, as he shook his head anxiously.

"What matter?" Ramirez answered.

"What matter, do you say?" Don Serapio replied in amazement; "but it seems to me that one of the most important conditions for the enterprise we are about to attempt is darkness."

"Certainly," Don Cristoval supported him; "if we wait till the sun has risen, any surprise will be impossible."

Ramirez shrugged his shoulders.

"You do not know the man under whose orders you have voluntarily placed yourselves," he answered.

"You know him better than we do then, as you speak thus of him?"

"Better than you or any one," the sailor said with considerable animation;

"I have the greatest faith in him."

"Ah," the two officers said, walking quickly up to him, "who is he, then?"

An ironical smile curled Ramirez's delicate lip.

"You know as well as I do: a warm patriot, and one of the most renowned chiefs of the movement."

"Hum!" Don Cristoval remarked, "that is not what we want to know."

"What then?" he asked with almost imperceptible irony.

"Hang it! you say that you have lived ten years with this man," Don Serapio went on: "you must know certain peculiarities about him which no one else is acquainted with, and which we should not be sorry to know."

"That is possible; unfortunately, I am utterly unable to satisfy your curiosity on that point; if El Alferez has not thought proper to give you details about his private life, it is not my place to reveal them to you."

Don Serapio was about to reply rather sharply to the sailor, when the door opened through which Don Alferez had gone out, and the pulquero entered, followed by a lady. The two officers could scarce refrain from a cry of surprise on recognising beneath this dress El Alferez himself.

The costume of El Alferez, though not rich, was elegant, and in good taste; his face, half concealed beneath the silken folds of his rebozo, partly hid his haughty expression; in his right hand he held a pretty sandal-wood fan, with which he played with graceful nonchalance.

"Well, caballeros," the young man said mincingly, "do you not recognise me? I am the daughter of your friend Dona Leonora Salcedo, Dona Mencia."

The three men bowed respectfully.

"Pardon me, senorita," Don Serapio replied as he gravely kissed the tips of El Alferez's fingers; "we know you perfectly well, but were so far from anticipating the happiness of meeting you here, that——"

"Even at this moment, after hearing you speak, we dare not believe in the reality of what we see."

The pulquero looked on in alarm. The worthy man understood nothing of what was going on.

"I do not understand your surprise, caballeros," the feigned Dona Mencia said; "was it not arranged some days back between yourselves and my husband, that we should go this morning and breakfast with Commandant Rodriguez, on board the *Libertad* corvette?"

"Of course," Don Serapio quickly exclaimed; "excuse me, senorita, but I really do not know where my head is. How could I have forgotten that?"

"I will excuse you," El Alferez replied with a smile, "but on condition that you repair your inexplicable forgetfulness, and rather ungallant behaviour, by offering me your arm to go on board the corvette at once."

"The more so," Don Cristoval added, "as we have rather a long distance to go, and I have no doubt the commandant is expecting us."

"I should think he was," Ramirez ejaculated; "why he sent me with a boat to take you aboard."

"Since that is the case, I think we shall do well by starting without further delay."

"We are at your orders, senorita."

"Stay, my good man," El Alferez added in a soft voice, and addressing the pulquero, "take this in recollection of me."

The good man, half stunned by what he saw, mechanically held out his right hand, into which the mysterious adventurer carelessly let a gold onza fall; then, taking Don Serapio's arm, he went out, preceded by Don Cristoval and Ramirez, who hurried to get the boat ready.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT SEA.

It was about four in the morning; the dawn was beginning to mark the horizon with wide white bands; on the extreme line of the water, a bright red reflection, the harbinger of sunrise, announced that the sun would soon appear. At this moment a light brig gradually emerged from the dense fog that hid it, and could be seen sailing close to the wind along the dangerous and rugged coast which forms the entrance of Galveston Bay, at the mouth of the Rio Trinidad.

It was a neat vessel of three hundred tons at the most, with a gracefully-built hull, and its tall masts coquettishly raking. The rigging was carefully painted and tarred, the yards symmetrically square, and more than all, the menacing muzzles of four eight-pounder carronades which peered out of the bulwarks on either side, and the long thirty-two pounder swivel in the bows, indicated that, although a man-of-war pennant might not be flying from the mainmast, it was not the less resolved, in case of necessity, to fight energetically against the cruisers that might attempt to check its progress.

At the moment when we first notice the brig, with the exception of the man at the wheel and an individual walking up and down the poop smoking his pipe, at the first glance the brig's deck seemed deserted; still, on examining it carefully, fifteen men constituting the watch might have been seen sleeping in the bows.

"Halloh!" the walker said suddenly, as he halted near the binnacle, and addressed the helmsman; "I fancy the wind is shifting."

"Yes, Master Lovel," the sailor answered, as he raised his hand to his woollen cap; "it has veered round two points."

Lovel was a man of about fifty, nearly as broad as he was tall, and bearing a striking resemblance to a barrel mounted on feet, but for all that gifted with far from common strength and activity; his violet nose, his thick lips, and 'highly-coloured face, with large red whiskers, gave him a jovial appearance, to which, however, two small grey and deep-set eyes, full of fire and resolution imparted something sceptical and mocking.

Morally, he was an honest, worthy man, open-hearted and loyal, an excellent sailor, and loving only two things, or rather beings, in the world: his captain, who had brought him up, and, as he often said, had taught him to make his first splice by administering tobacco to him, and his ship, which he had seen

built, which he had gone aboard when ready for sea and had never quitted since.

Master Lovel had never known father or mother; hence he had made the brig and his captain his family. All his loving faculties, a long time driven back and slumbering in his heart, were so fully concentrated on them, that what he felt for both went beyond the limits of a reasonable affection, and had acquired the veritable proportions of a gigantic fanaticism. However, the captain, of whom we shall soon speak, amply requited the old sailor's friendship.

"By the way, lieutenant, I ask your pardon," the helmsman continued; "do you know that we have been navigating queerly the last few days?"

"Do you think so, lad?"

"Hang it! sir, these continued tacks, and that boat we sent ashore yesterday has not yet returned—all that is rather singular."

"Hum!" the officer said, without any other expression of his opinion.

"Where may we now be going, lieutenant?" the sailor went on.

"Are you very anxious to know?" Lovel asked him.

"Well," the other said, as he turned his quid in his mouth, and sent forth a stream of blackish saliva, "I confess that I should not be sorry to know."

"Really now?—well, my boy," the old sailor said, with a crafty smile, "if you are asked, you will answer that you do not know; in that way you are certain of not compromising yourself."

Then, after looking for an instant at the helmsman's downcast face on receiving this strange answer, he added—"Strike eight bells, my boy; there is the sun rising over there behind the mountains; call the watch."

And, after restoring his pipe to the corner of his mouth, he resumed his walk. The sailor seized the cord fastened to the clapper of the bell, and struck four double strokes. At this signal they knew so well, the men lying in the forecabin sprang up tumultuously, and rushed to the hatchway, shouting—

"Up with you, starboard watch; up, up, it is eight bells. Starboard watch, ahoy!"

So soon as the watch was changed, the master gave the necessary orders to trim the vessel. Then, as the sun was beginning to rise above the horizon in a flood of ruddy vapour, which gradually dispersed the dense fog that had enveloped the brig throughout the night like a winding-sheet, he set a man to the foretop to look seaward, and examine the coast they were sailing along. When all these various duties had been discharged, the old sailor resumed his walk, taking a look every now and then at the masts, and muttering between his teeth—"Where can we be going? He would be very kind, if he would tell me: we are making a regular blind man's traverse, and we shall be very lucky if we get out of it safe and sound."

All at once his face brightened, and a glad smile spread over it. The captain had just left his cabin and come upon deck. Captain Johnson was at this period a man of hardly three-and-thirty years of age, and above the middle height; his gestures were simple, graceful, and full of natural elegance; his features were masculine and marked, and his black eyes, in which intelligence sparkled, gave his countenance an expression of grandeur, strength, and loyalty.

"Good morning, father," he said to Master Lovel, as he cordially offered him his hand.

"Good morning, lad," the other replied; "did you sleep well?"

"Very well, thank you, father. Is there anything new?"

At this question, apparently so simple, the lieutenant drew himself up, raised his hand to his hat, and answered deferentially—

"Captain, there is nothing new on board. I tacked at three o'clock, and,

according to your orders, we having been sailing as close to the wind as we could, at a rate of six three-quarter knots an hour, under fore-top sails, and always keeping Galveston Point on the larboard quarter.

"That is well," the captain answered.

In all matters connected with duty, Master Lovel, in spite of the reiterated remarks of his chief, constantly maintained toward the latter the tone and manner of a subordinate to his superior. The captain, seeing that the old sailor could not be turned from this, ended by paying no attention to it, and left him free to speak as he thought proper.

"By the way, captain," the lieutenant continued, with some hesitation, "we are drawing near the gulf; do you intend to pass through it?"

"I do."

"But we shall be sunk."

"Not such fools."

"Hum! I do not see how we shall escape it."

"You will see; besides, must we not go and pick up our boat, which has not yet returned?"

"That is true; I did not think of it."

"Well, you see; and our passengers?"

"I have not seen them yet this morning."

"They will soon come on deck."

"A ship in sight," the watch shouted.

"That is what I was waiting for," said the captain.

"To tack?"

"On the contrary, to pass without a shot in front of the fort that commands the entrance of the bay."

"I do not understand."

"All right; you soon will."

And speaking to the look-out man, he said—

"In what direction is that ship?"

"To starboard, to windward of us; it is coming out of a creek, in which it was hidden, and steering straight down on the brig."

"Very good," the captain answered; then, turning to Lovel, he continued: "This ship is chasing us; we shall, by constant short tacks, pass the fort and the battery which crosses fire with it. The Mexicans, who are watching us, feeling convinced that we cannot escape their cruiser, will not take the trouble to fire at us, but let us pass through without offering any obstacle."

And, leaving his lieutenant astounded at this singular line of argument, which he did not at all comprehend, the captain went on the quarter-deck, and leaning over the gangway, began carefully watching the movements of the ship signalled by the look-out.

The men had been quietly beaten to quarters, and thirty powerful sailors, armed to the teeth, were holding the running rigging, ready to obey the slightest signal from their captain. For more than an hour the brig had been approaching the coast, and the captain, being now compelled to skirt a submarine reef, whose situation was not positively known to him, ordered sail to be reduced, and advanced, sounding-lead in hand. The cruiser, on the contrary, was literally covered with canvas, and grew momentarily larger, while assuming the imposing proportions of a first-class corvette; its black hull could be clearly distinguished, along which ran a long white stripe, containing sixteen port-holes, through which passed the muzzles of her guns. On the shore, to which the brig was now close, could be seen a great number of persons of both sexes, who, shouting, yelling, and clapping their hands, eagerly followed the incidents of

this strange chase. Suddenly a light cloud of smoke rose from the bow of the corvette, the sound of a gun was dully heard, and a Mexican flag was hoisted.

"Ah, ah!" Captain Johnson said; "she has at length decided on throwing off her incognito. Come, lieutenant, politeness deserves the same; show her our colours."

A minute later, a large star-spangled flag was majestically fluttering at the stern of the brig. At the appearance of the United States colours, so audaciously hoisted, a shout of fury was raised aboard the Mexican corvette, which was taken up by the crowd assembled at the point, though it was impossible to tell, owing to the distance, whether they were shouts of joy or anger.

In the meanwhile the sun was beginning to rise, the morning was growing apace, and there must be an end to the affair, especially as the corvette, confiding in her strength, and now almost within gun-shot, would not fail to open fire on the American vessel.

The captain gave his lieutenant a sign to come to him, and bending down his ear, whispered something.

"Eh, eh!" the lieutenant said with a hearty laugh, "that is an idea. By Jove! we may have some fun."

And, without saying another word, he proceeded forwards. On reaching the swivel gun he had it unlashd and carefully loaded, adding a ball and a grape shot to the ordinary charge. Bending over the sight he seized the screw placed under the breech, then making a sign to the men who stood on either side with handspikes, he began laying the gun slowly and with the utmost precaution, scrupulously calculating the distance that separated the two ships, and the deviation caused by the rolling. At length, when he believed he had attained the desired result, he seized the lanyard, fell back, and made a signal to the captain, who was impatiently awaiting the termination of his proceedings.

"Attention!" the latter shouted; "stand by, all."

There was a moment of supreme expectation.

"Is all clear?"

"Yes," the lieutenant replied.

"Ready about," the captain ordered; "down with the helm! Ease off the jib sheets! Sheet home top sails! Sheet home lower sails! Haul the bow-lines taut!"

The sailors hurried to the running rigging, and the ship, obedient to the impulse given it, majestically swung round. At the moment when it fell off, and had its bows turned toward the broadside of the corvette, Master Lovel, who was watching for a favourable opportunity to carry out the orders he had received, sharply pulled the lanyard and fired. The Mexicans, confounded by this sudden aggression, which they were far from anticipating from an enemy apparently so weak, replied furiously, and a shower of iron and lead hurtled over the deck and through the rigging of the American ship. The fort and battery continued to preserve the strictest neutrality, and Captain Johnson did not take the trouble to reply.

"Brace up closer to the wind!" he shouted. "Haul down the sheets! we have had fun enough, lads."

The brig continued its course; and when the smoke had dispersed, the Mexican corvette could be perceived in a pitiable condition. The shot fired by Master Lovel had carried away her bowsprit close by the head, which naturally entailed the fall of the foremast, and the poor corvette bore up to repair hastily the worst of the damage.

On board the brig, owing to the hurry in which the Mexicans had returned

the fire, only one man had been killed and three slightly wounded. As for the damage, it was trifling; only a few ropes were cut, that was all.

"Now," the captain said, as he came down from the quarterdeck, "in ten minutes, father, you will tack, and when we are abreast of the fort you will lie to, let down a boat, and let me know."

"What!" the lieutenant could not refrain from saying, "you mean to go ashore?"

"Hang it!" said the captain; "why, I only came here for that purpose."

"Are you going to the fort?"

"Yes. Still, as it is always as well to be on the right side, you will send into the boat the ten most resolute men of the crew, with axes, cutlasses, muskets, and pistols. Let all be in order, and ready for fighting."

"I fancy those precautions will be unnecessary," said a man who had just come on deck.

"Ah! it is you, Master Tranquil," the captain replied, as he shook hands with the old hunter; for it was he who had so unexpectedly interfered in the conversation. "What do you say?"

"I say," the Canadian replied, in his calm voice, "that your precautions will probably be unnecessary."

"Why so?"

"Hang it! I don't know, for I am not a sailor. But look for yourself. Do you not think as I do—that something extraordinary is taking place on board the corvette?"

The captain quickly opened his telescope, and fixed it on the Mexican ship.

"It is true," he said, a moment later. "Oh, oh! Can our audacious attempt have proved successful?"

"All leads to the supposition," said the hunter with his old stoicism.

"By heavens! I will ascertain."

"What will you do?"

"By Jupiter! convince myself of what is taking place."

"As you please."

"Bear up!" the captain ordered.

The manœuvre was executed. The sheets were let go, and the brig, catching more wind in its sails, advanced rapidly toward the corvette, on board which a strange scene was taking place at this moment, which must interest Captain Johnson in the highest degree. But, in order to make the reader understand this scene, we must now return to El Alferez and his comrades.

At the moment when the four men reached the jetty, although it was about seven in the morning, the beach was nearly deserted; only a few ships' boats were fastened up and landing the men who were going to buy provisions. It was, therefore, an easy matter for the conspirators to embark without attracting attention to their movements. At a signal given by Ramirez, the boat, which had been pulling back and forwards during the night, came nearer land, and when the four men were seated in the stern sheets, and Ramirez had taken the tiller, the boat started for a small creek situated a little distance beyond the roadstead.

The breeze, which during the night had been rather weak, had gradually risen; the boat was easily got out to sea, sail was hoisted, and it soon entered the creek, where the "*Libertad*" was riding gently on her anchors. Still, it was easy for a sailor to see that this ship, apparently so quiet, was ready to slip out at a moment's notice. The sails, though furled, were cast off, and the anchor, aprak only needed a turn of the capstan to be tripped. Posted craftily in this creek, like a bird of prey in the hollow of a rock, the corvette could easily

expand its sails, and dart out on any suspicious vessel signalled by the look-out.

The boat had scarce come within hail ere a sentry, standing in the starboard gangway, hailed it in Spanish. Ramirez replied, and, leaning on the tiller, made the boat describe a graceful curve, and brought her up to the starboard ladder. The officer of the watch was standing at the top to receive the visitors. On perceiving a lady, he hurried down the ladder to offer his hand, and to do her the honours of the ship she was about to enter.

To the right and left of the entrance, sailors, drawn up in file, saluted by raising their hands to their caps, while a boatswain gave the accustomed whistle. As we have already mentioned, the "*Libertad*" was a first-class corvette. Don Manuel Rodriguez, her commandant, was an old sailor, brought up in the Spanish navy, and had retained its healthy traditions; hence, his ship was kept with great care and coquettishness. Don Serapio and Don Cristoval, themselves naval officers, could not refrain from expressing to the officer of the watch the satisfaction they experienced at seeing a vessel in such splendid order.

Commandant Rodriguez hastened on deck to receive his guests; the boat was fastened astern of the corvette, while its crew went forward.

Like the other Spanish American republics, the Mexican confederation has but few vessels; its navy is composed of but a dozen ships at the most—consisting of corvettes, brigs, and schooners.

Commandant Rodriguez, an energetic man and excellent sailor, had been chosen to keep supplies from the Texas rebels; for two months he had been cruising off the coast of Texas, where he had established a rigorous blockade, and owing to his intelligent arrangements, he had managed, up to the period we have arrived at, to stop or turn back all vessels sent from the United States to the help of the insurgents. The latter, reduced to their own resources, and understanding that the decisive hour would soon strike for them, had resolved to get rid of this corvette at all risks.

The chiefs of the insurgents had formed their plans to this effect. During Commandant Rodriguez's rare visits to Galveston, he was adroitly surrounded by persons who ostensibly professed a deep hatred for the revolution, while in secret they were the active and devoted agents of the insurgent chiefs. Almost involuntarily the commandant had been induced to invite several persons to visit his corvette, and breakfast on board; but the old sailor was a true Mexican, that is to say, accustomed to all the tricks and treachery of a country where revolutions have been counted by hundreds during the twenty years since it proclaimed its so-called independence, and his prudence did not fail him under the circumstances. Being not at all anxious to run the risk of seeing his ship boarded, he left the roads, and anchored in a solitary creek, in order to have his elbows at liberty; and then, instead of inviting many persons at the same time, he merely requested Dona Mencía, her father, and two of her cousins, officers in the United States' service, to pay him a visit.

The captain frowned on seeing the number of the boat's crew; but, reflecting that he had two hundred and fifty men aboard, he did not think for a moment that sixteen men, apparently unarmed, would try to seize his ship, and it was with the most smiling and affectionate air that he received Dona Mencía and the persons who accompanied her.

After showing them all over the corvette, he led his guests to the stern gallery, where a table had been laid, and a magnificent breakfast awaited them. Only five persons sat down, the supposed young lady, her pretended cousins, the commandant, and his first lieutenant, an old sailor like himself, full of ex-

perience and bravery. The breakfast began in the most cordial and frank manner; the commandant regretted that Dona Mencia's father had been unable to accompany her, as he had promised, and a most gallant conversation went on. Presently a warrant officer opened the door, and, at a sign from the commandant, whispered a few words in his ear.

"Senora," the commandant said, leaning over to the young lady seated by his side, "are you afraid of the sea?"

"I?" she replied with a smile, "why do you ask, commandant?"

"Because," he answered, "unless you immediately leave my vessel, which, I confess, would greatly annoy me, you will be compelled to take a trip to sea for some hours."

"I am the daughter and cousin of sailors, commandant; that is as good as saying that a trip to sea would be most pleasing to me under any circumstances."

"Very good," the commandant said gaily; "you are a true heroine, Dona Mencia; you fear nothing."

"Or, at any rate, very little," she replied.

"Will you permit me to ask, commandant," said Don Serapio, "whether you are starting simply to afford us the pleasure of a trip, or whether a more serious motive obliges you to leave your anchorage?"

"I have no secrets from you," he said, "and for about a fortnight I have been playing a game of chess with a brig, whose appearance is most suspicious. Its rig lead us to believe that it is a North American privateer, trying to land arms and men for the insurgents."

"Do you imagine," Don Cristoval objected, "that a privateer brig, knowing you to be in these parts, would venture to force a passage?"

"Yes, I do. These privateers are afraid of nothing; and, besides, during the war of independence, I myself carried out more daring adventures than this."

"Then we are about to witness a sea-fight?" Dona Mencia asked timidly.

"Oh, do not feel alarmed, senorita; it will not go so far as that, I hope; this brig, which I had lost out of sight for two days, has just reappeared, but this time with the apparent object of getting close enough to land to send a boat ashore. I will chase it vigorously, and do not doubt I shall compel it to put out to sea again."

"Really, that is delightful!" Dona Mencia exclaimed; "the fête will be complete; a trip to sea, a chase, and, perhaps, the capture of a vessel. You are kind."

While the conversation became more and more friendly and lively in the state cabin, the corvette had started, and, with all sail set, was pursuing Captain Johnson's brig.

"Halloh!" Don Cristoval suddenly asked, "what has become of our boat?"

"It was left fastened to a buoy," the commandant said; "we will pick it up again when we return to our anchorage."

"Well," Don Serapio remarked laughingly, "if the privateer should feel inclined to fight, our sixteen men are quite at your disposal."

"I thank you, but do not think I shall require their assistance."

"Who knows? no one can foresee events. Our sailors are brave, and, if it should come to fighting, be assured they will do their share."

Only one of the guests had remained silent during the breakfast, contenting himself with eating and drinking, while attentively listening. This guest was the lieutenant. So soon as the ship had started, he left the table, bowed to the company, and went on deck.

"Your lieutenant is no talker, commandant," Dona Mencía observed; "he only opened his lips to eat and drink."

"That is true, senorita; but pray excuse him, he is an old sailor, but little accustomed to society."

At this moment a loud detonation made the vessel quiver. "Ah!" said Dona Mencía with a cry of terror, "what does that mean?"

"Less than nothing, senorita; we have merely hoisted our flag, and fired a blank shot, to oblige the brig to show her colours."

"Would there be any danger in going on deck?" Dona Mencía asked with curiosity.

"Not the least."

"In that case, with your permission, we will go up and see what is happening."

"I am at your orders, senorita."

The breakfast was over; they left the table and went up on the quarter-deck. At about a gun-shot and a half distant, the brig could be seen, from whose peak haughtily floated a large American flag.

"I suspected it," said the commandant. "It is a privateer, and has hoisted American colours to deceive us."

"Do you think, then, that ship is not American?" Don Serapio asked.

"No more than you are; it is an Argentine or Brazilian privateer."

"Still, it appears American built."

"That proves nothing; our ships, bought in different countries, have nothing that causes them to be recognised, for we have no docks."

"That is true; but look, she is going to tack."

"Yes, the sails are beginning to shiver."

The Mexicans fancied themselves so secure from an attack, that most of the crew had left their quarters to follow the manœuvres of the brig; the sailors, perched on the yards, or leaning out of the ports, were curiously looking on, without dreaming of the danger such a breach of discipline might entail. In the meanwhile the brig came round, as Don Serapio had said. Suddenly, at the moment when it completed the manœuvre, a detonation was heard, a shrill whistle cut through the air, and the corvette's bowsprit, pierced by a ball, fell into the sea, dragging with it the foremast.

This produced extraordinary confusion on board the corvette; the terrified sailors ran about in all directions, listening to nothing. At length the commandant succeeded in overcoming the tumult; the crew recognised his voice, and at the order to fire, fifteen guns thundered at once in reply to the aggression of the privateer.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PRIZE.

THE damage sustained by the corvette was serious; the bowsprit is the key of the ship's rigging; its loss entailed that of the foremast, which the main-topmast, no longer stayed, speedily followed. The utmost disorder prevailed on board, as nearly always under such circumstances.

The deck was encumbered with fragments of every description, yards, spars, sails, stunsail-booms, and entangled rigging, in the midst of which the sailors

ran about distractedly, abandoning their posts, deaf to the exhortations equally with the menaces of their officers, and having only one thought; to escape from the death they believed suspended over their heads.

A fresh incident occurred suddenly, which rendered the situation of the ship, if possible, more critical and desperate. Commandant Rodriguez had not left the quarter-deck: motionless at his post during the events we have described, he had continued to give his orders in a firm voice, apparently not noticing the symptoms of insubordination which, since the catastrophe had happened, were manifest amongst the crew. With pale face, frowning brow, and clenched teeth, the old sailor mechanically played with the hilt of his sword, taking every now and then a cold and resolute glance around him, while exerting his officers to redouble their efforts to do their duty bravely.

Dona Mencía and the two supposititious officers of the American navy were standing silent and attentive by his side, probably awaiting the moment for action. At the tumult which suddenly broke out on the fore-castle, they all three started and drew nearer to the commandant. When the brig had so skilfully carried away the bowsprit of the *Libertad*, Ramirez and his sailors were the first to sow and propagate terror among the crew by uttering cries of terror, and running in all directions. Their example was promptly followed. Then they changed their tactics, and began openly accusing the commandant, by asserting that he was a traitor, who wished to ruin them, and surrender the corvette to the insurgents.

There is nothing, however stupid it may be, a thinker has said, which people may not be led to believe by a certain mode of treating them. This remark is strictly true, and this time again received perfect application. The sailors of the *Libertad* forgot in an instant all they owed to the commandant, whose constant solicitude watched over them with paternal care, for they were urged on and excited by the perfidious insinuations of Ramirez and his comrades, and rushed tumultuously toward the quarter-deck, uttering menaces and cries of revolt.

The officers, justly alarmed, and not knowing what means to employ to bring these men back to their duty, collected round their commandant, resolved to save themselves or perish with him. The old sailor was still apparently just as calm and stoical; nothing revealed on his stern face the agony that secretly crushed his heart. With his arms folded on his chest, his head erect, and a steady glance, he awaited the mutineers.

The latter soon invaded the after-part of the vessel; but, after passing the mainmast, they stopped, through a remnant of that respect which is innate in sailors for their superiors.

On reaching the foot of the mainmast, then, the mutineers hesitated, for they no longer felt on their own ground, and at length stopped: for the mere fact of their invading this part of the deck constituted a grave infraction of naval discipline. We have said that they stopped; but they were like an angry sea which breaks against the foot of a dyke it cannot dash over; that is to say, yelling and gesticulating furiously, but yet without going an inch further. At the same time, however, they did not fall back.

There was a momentary truce between the two parties, who, like practised duellists, had tried to discover their adversary's vulnerable point before crossing swords. A deep silence prevailed on the deck of this ship, where so many passions were fermenting in these hearts of bronze; no other sound was audible save the hollow and monotonous moaning of the sea, as it broke against the sides of the corvette, and the indistinct sound of weapons clutched by eager hands.

This hesitation had something sinister and startling about it, and the commandant resolved to put an end to it at all hazards. He understood that he was the only person who could make an appeal to these misguided men, who might possibly not remain dumb to the voice of duty speaking through the lips of a man whose noble character they had enjoyed many opportunities of appreciating, and whom they had been so long accustomed to respect and love.

Commandant Rodriguez looked slowly and sadly, but yet firmly, round him, and extending his arm in the direction of the brig, said, in a loud and marked voice—

“My men, here comes the enemy. We have our revenge to take upon him: then why are you not at your quarters? What do you want of me? Are you afraid that I shall fail you when the hour for fighting arrives?”

At this direct appeal a strange quiver ran along the ranks of the mutineers; some of them were even going to reply, when a voice was heard from the rear: “Who tells you that we regard that vessel as an enemy?”

Immediately hurrahs and shouts of joy, mingled with oaths and hisses, burst forth on all sides.

“The man who dares to speak so,” the commandant shouted, “is a traitor and a coward. He does not form part of my ship’s crew.”

An indescribable tumult then broke out. The sailors, forgetting all respect and discipline, rushed toward the quarter-deck with frightful yells and vociferations. The commandant, not at all disconcerted by this hostile manifestation, seized a pistol, which a faithful sailor handed him, coolly cocked it, and addressing the mutineers, said: “Take care. The first who advances one step further I will blow out his brains.”

Some men are gifted with so great a magnetic power, and their influence over the lower classes is so real, that the two to three hundred mutineers, at the sight of this man, who alone withstood and threatened them with a pistol, hesitated, and finally stopped, with a vague movement of alarm. It was evident that this pistol was little to be feared, even under the hypothesis that the commandant carried out his threat, since it would only kill or wound one man; still, we repeat, all these men stopped, surprised, perhaps terrified. A smile played round the commandant’s lips; he understood that these rough and rebellious natures had been subdued.

“Every man to his quarters,” he said; “the topmen will get the ship clear while the carpenters rig up a jury bowsprit.”

And leaving the quarter-deck, the commandant advanced resolutely toward the mutineers. The latter fell back as he advanced, without speaking or gesticulating, but only opposing that final resistance, the most dangerous of all, the force of inertia. It was all over with the mutiny.

We have said that Dona Mencia and her two companions attentively followed the incidents of this scene, in readiness to interfere when the moment arrived. Commandant Rodriguez had scarcely left the quarterdeck ere the young woman, or young man, whichever it may please the reader to call this mysterious being, rushed forward, and seizing a telescope, fixed it on the brig, as if to feel certain of the privateer’s position, and be assured of support if required. The brig was now only two cables’ lengths from the corvette, and within a few minutes would be within hail.

Then Dona Mencia, throwing off her feminine character, hurriedly tore off her dress, removed her bonnet, and appeared in the masculine attire El Alferéz had worn at the pulqueria. This transformation had been so rapid that the officers and crew had not recovered from the astonishment this strange metamorphosis caused them, when the young man, drawing a pistol from his belt

cocked and pointed it at a number of cartridges the boys had brought on deck when the captain beat to quarters, and which they had left lying pell-mell at the foot of the mizenmast during the disorder that followed the fall of the spars.

"Surrender!" El Alferez shouted in a thundering voice; "surrender, or you are dead men!"

Don Cristoval and Don Serapio were standing on the right and left of the young man, holding a pistol in either hand. Ramirez, for his part, had lost no time; by his care two of the bow carronades had been dragged from their ports and trailed on the stern, and two sailors, match in hand, were standing motionless by them, only awaiting the signal to fire. Ramirez and the fourteen men left him were aiming at the Mexican sailors. The crew was taken between two fires.

The events had occurred with such rapidity, this coup-de-main, prepared long beforehand, had been carried out with such coolness and skill, and all had been so thoroughly foreseen, that the commandant, after taking a despairing glance along the deck, was obliged to allow that he had only one chance of escape—laying down his arms.

"We are not pirates," El Alferez said, "Commandant Rodriguez, we are Texans; you can lay down your arms without shame—not to save your life, to which the defeat you have just suffered causes you to attach but slight value, and which you would doubtless readily sacrifice to expiate your misfortunes—but you are responsible before Heaven for the two hundred and fifty men forming your crew. Why needlessly shed precious blood! For the last time I invite you to surrender."

At this moment a thick shadow covered the deck of the corvette; the brig, which every one had forgotten, had continued to advance; it had come within pistol-shot, and its lofty sails stretched out over the vessel and intercepted the sunshine.

"Halloh the ship!" a voice shouted from the stern of the cruiser; "send a boat aboard us with your captain."

This voice sounded like a thunder-clap in the ears of the Mexicans. There was a moment of intense silence, during which all eyes were instinctively turned on the privateer; her yards were lined with topmen armed with muskets and hand-grenades, through the open ports the men could be seen standing by the guns, and it literally held the corvette under its fire.

"Well," El Alferez continued, stamping his foot impatiently, "have you made up your mind; yes or no?"

"Sir," the commandant answered, "by an infamous act of treachery you have become master of my vessel; as any resistance is henceforth useless, I surrender."

And with a gesture full of dignity the old sailor drew his sword, snapped the blade asunder, and after throwing the pieces into the sea, retired to the stern.

"Captain Johnson," El Alferez shouted, "your corvette is ours; send a boat's crew on board."

A whistle was heard from the brig's deck; a boat was let down, and a few minutes after, twenty privateer's men, armed to the teeth, and commanded by the captain in person, stepped on the corvette's deck. The disarmament of the crew was effected without the slightest resistance, and Commandant Rodriguez and his staff were at once transferred to the brig, in order that the Mexican sailors, who were much more numerous than their visitors, might be without a leader in the event of their attempting to regain possession of the corvette by a desperate effort. But most of them were natives of Texas, who found among

the sailors of the brig many of their old friends and acquaintances; in a few moments the two crews were on the most cordial terms.

Captain Johnson resolved to profit by this fortunate circumstance; the privateer was in a very difficult position, and literally experienced at this moment an embarrassment of wealth; he had, without striking a blow, captured a first-class corvette, but that corvette required a crew, and the sailors he could dispose of by taking them from his own ship to put them aboard the prize were insufficient; the good understanding that had almost suddenly sprung up between the two crews, therefore, supplied him with the means of escape from the difficulty.

Captain Johnson was too old a hand not to know how he should act under the present circumstances. So soon as the disarmament was effected he mounted the quarterdeck, took up the speaking-trumpet, and making no distinction among the sailors scattered about the deck, he ordered a series of manœuvres, intended to habituate the men to the sound of his voice, and prove to them that he was a thorough sailor, which all recognised in a few minutes.

The orders were then executed with such rapidity and eagerness that the corvette, almost unserviceable an hour previously, was soon under jury masts, and in a condition to sail for any port to which it pleased its new commander to take it. The deck had been completely cleared, the running rigging cut during the action spliced—in short, an hour before sunset any stranger whom accident brought aboard the *Libertad* could have formed no idea of what had really taken place.

When he had obtained this result, Captain Johnson smiled, and ordered Master Lovel, who had followed him on board, to pipe all hands on deck. At this familiar signal the sailors, who were now quite submissive, gaily ranged themselves at the foot of the mainmast, and waited patiently for their new captain's orders. The latter knew how to address rude fellows like these; after complimenting them on the intelligent way in which they had comprehended his orders, he told them that he had no intention of keeping them prisoners, for the majority of them were Texans like himself, and as such had a claim to his entire sympathy. Consequently, those sailors who did not wish to serve the Texan Republic would be landed at the first place on Mexican territory the corvette touched at; as for those who consented to remain aboard and serve their country, their pay would be raised to twenty-five piastres a month, and in order to prove to them the good intentions of the Texan government towards them, a month's pay would be distributed on the spot in the shape of bounty.

This proposition was greeted with shouts of joy by those men who began at once to calculate how many glasses of tafia and measures of pulque they could consume for this fabulous sum of twenty-five dollars.

The captain saw the effect he had produced, and continued in the midst of a religious silence—

"Then, that is settled, my men. You are free not to remain on board, where I have no desire to retain you as prisoners. Still, reflect on the propositions I make you, in the name of the government I have the honour of serving, for I consider them in every way advantageous for you. Now, let those who wish to enter on board the corvette pass to larboard, while those who wish to be put ashore can remain where they are. The purser will draw up the agreement, and pay the bounty at once."

The captain had installed the purser at the foot of the mizen-mast, with a table before him, and bags of dollars at his feet. This display met with the greatest success; nothing more was wanting, and the sight of the piastres decided even the most irresolute.

The enlistment lasted two hours. All the sailors entered—all now joyously clinked in their horny hands the handsome piastres they had received; and assuredly, if a Mexican ship had come up at the moment, the new crew would have given it a rude reception. The result obtained by Captain Johnson was easy to foresee; in every sailor there is something of the privateer, and ready money is the only available argument with him.

The various events we have described, and the incidents that followed them, had occupied a considerable period; the whole day had slipped away, and the organisation was not completed till an hour before sunset. Captain Johnson gave the command of the corvette to Don Serapio, with Don Cristoval as first lieutenant, and Ramirez as master; while he himself retained the command of the brig. Then, when all was in order, the captain had the Mexican flag hoisted at the peak of the corvette, which immediately started for Galveston.

The captain returned on board his own vessel, taking with him El Alferez, to whose determination and coolness the Texan revolutionary government owed the possession of a naval force. The result was grand, and surpassed even the expectations of the insurgents. But that was not enough; on getting aboard his brig, the captain ordered the Texan flag to be struck, turned upside down, and hoisted again with the Mexican colours above it. The brig set sail and kept up with the corvette, being careful to keep under her guns, as if really captured by her.

The sailors did not at all comprehend this singular manœuvre; but, as they had seen the captain laugh, they suspected some stratagem, and, in spite of the shame they felt at seeing their colours beneath those of Mexico, they repressed their murmurs, in the hope of a speedy revenge.

In the meanwhile, the whole population of Galveston had since morning been plunged in the greatest anxiety. Assembled on the jetty, they had watched the obstinate pursuit until the vessels disappeared; the sound of cannon, repeated by the echo of the cliffs, had reached the city; a fight had, therefore, taken place, but what the result was everybody asked the other, and no one could answer.

The silence of the fort had also seemed inexplicable; they could not understand why it had not sunk the brig as it passed. Suddenly there was an outburst of shouts and cheers, for the brig and corvette re-appeared at the entrance of the passage, with the Mexican colours proudly flying on the two ships over the Texan flag, which was disgracefully reversed. This delight knew no bounds when the ships were seen to anchor beneath the guns of the battery; the Mexicans were victors, and the Texan insurgents had suffered a defeat, from which they would not so easily recover.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PREPARATION.

WE will now return to the Jaguar, whom we left departing from the pulqueria and proceeding at the head of his bold companions toward the fort of the Point which he had resolved to carry by surprise. The task, if not impossible, was at the least very difficult, and it needed all the audacious rashness of the young chief merely to conceive the thought of undertaking it.

The night was dark; heavy clouds laden with electricity coursed across the sky, and by intercepting the moonbeams rendered the gloom denser still. The conspirators passed silently through the deserted streets of the town like a legion of phantoms. They went on thus for a long time, with watchful eye and finger on the rifle trigger, ready to fire at the slightest suspicious sound; but nothing disturbed their march to the sea-shore, which they reached after making a thousand windings, in order to foil the spies who might have attempted to follow them in the darkness. The spot where they were was a small sandy creek. Here, at a word from the Jaguar, they halted, for the difficulties of the expedition were about to begin. The young chief assembled his comrades round him, and said—

"The Fort of the Point is impregnable, or, at least, passes as such; I have resolved to deprive it of the haughty boast, and for that purpose have counted on you, comrades. Owing to the opinion the Mexicans have of the strength of this citadel, they have considered it unnecessary to keep up a numerous garrison there, convinced as they are that its position will defend it, and that it is impossible to carry it, save by treachery. The garrison, therefore, is only composed of thirty soldiers, commanded by a lieutenant; it is small, and yet enormous; small, if we force them into a hand-to-hand fight; enormous, if we are compelled to remain at a distance. On the land side, the rock on which the fort is built is so perpendicular, that we could not hope to ascend beyond one half of it; for, excepting the path cut in the rock, which is defended at regular distances by barricades, escalading is impracticable. We cannot, therefore, think of attacking it on that side. But the sea is left to us, if the land fails us; if we can succeed in landing on the narrow strip of earth which is left uncovered at low water for about an hour at the foot of the fortress, it is probable that we shall succeed in our enterprise; for it will never occur to the garrison that any attempt to attack them by sea will be made on such a night as this. That is not all—we must reach that strip of land, and speedily too; the sea is beginning to ebb, and the moment is favourable. This is what I propose doing."

The conspirators collected round their chief paid the most earnest attention to his words. It was for them a question of life or death.

"Now, my companions," the Jaguar continued, "we have no boat in which to reach the base of the fort; the sound of oars would give the alarm, excite the suspicion of the garrison, and reveal our presence; we must, therefore, cross by swimming; but it is nearly a league to go; the tide runs out fast, and we shall have to cross it at right-angles; moreover, the night is dark, and the sea rough. I will only remind you of the sharks we run a risk of meeting on the way. You see, comrades, that it is a rude affair, and it is certain that we shall not all reach the sand strip. Some of us will remain on the road; but what matter, so long as we succeed? You are brave men, so I have preferred to speak openly with you.

"Now," the Jaguar continued, "it is time to get ready. Listen to me. We are about to attempt a surprise, and must therefore act accordingly. Let us leave here our fire-arms, which would not only be useless, but might prove dangerous, if a shot were fired imprudently and revealed our presence; hence each will undress, only keeping on his trousers, and carrying his dagger between his teeth; that will be sufficient, as further clothing would only embarrass us in our long swim."

"Take your daggers between your teeth," he ordered. "Heaven protect us. Forward, brothers, and long live liberty!"

"Long live liberty!" the conspirators shouted, as they dashed into the sea.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SURPRISE.

THEY swam on without a cry, moan, or sigh. At the head of the gloomy line formed by the energetic heads of the conspirators, the Jaguar progressed alone.

Three-quarters of an hour passed, during which all the strength and courage the human will possesses were expended in this struggle of giants by these men, whom nothing could quell. Not one had broken down; the line was still compact, and they advanced with the same vigour. Before them, at about a musket-shot distance, was the fortress they were approaching.

At length, after superhuman efforts, they succeeded in cutting through the current that dashed with extreme rapidity and strength into the straits. The hardest work was over; from this moment they needed only to let themselves drift gently ashore. So soon as the Jaguar had reached land, his first care was to count his comrades; nine were missing. These had died without venting a cry or complaint; when fatigue crushed them, they had sunk sooner than claim assistance.

The conspirators were at the very foot of the rock, at the top of which the fort was built. It was a great step made, but it was as nothing so long as the rock was not escalated. But how to attempt that feat on a dark night and with a nor'-wester, which every moment blew with greater force, and threatened to hurl to destruction the man who was so rash as to attempt such an ascent!

The persons who have read the early scenes of this story will doubtless remember the portrait we drew of the Jaguar. Although still very young, or at least appearing so, he joined exceptional strength to marvellous agility and skill; his adventurous character found delight in extraordinary things, and impossibilities alone offered any attraction to him. After reflecting for a few moments, he advised his comrades to lie down at the foot of the rock, lest they should be blown away by the nor'-wester, which was raging at the moment, passed two daggers through his belt, and began examining with the most scrupulous attention the rock he wished to attack.

He found that which at a distance seemed to form an almost perpendicular wall was hollowed out at several points, and fissures had been opened by time—that great demolisher, which wears away the hardest granite. Though the ascent was still extremely difficult, it was not impossible.

"It is all right, brothers," said the Jaguar, "so take courage; now, I entertain firm hopes of success."

And he prepared to mount. Lanzi followed him.

"Where are you going?" the Jaguar asked him.

"With you," the half-breed answered, laconically.

"For what good? one man is sufficient."

"Yes," he answered; "but two are better."

"Well, come on, then." And then, turning to his attentive comrades, he added, "So soon as the rope falls, cling on to it without fear."

"Yes," the conspirators said.

The Jaguar then planted his dagger in a crevice above his head, and with the help of his hands and feet, raised himself sufficiently to thrust in a second dagger above the first. The first step was taken; from dagger to dagger the Jaguar reached, in a few minutes, a species of platform about two square yards in area, where it was possible to draw breath. Lanzi arrived almost with him.

"Hilloa!" he said, with that magnificent coolness which never deserted him, "what's this?"

"Why, it is a grotto. Viva Dios!" the Jaguar exclaimed a moment later.

"It looks to me very like one," said the half-breed, with his old coolness. "Per Dios! whatever this cave may be, and no matter where it ends, it is certain that it will, at any rate, offer us an excellent shelter. Supposing, at any rate, as is possible, that we cannot succeed in effecting the ascent of the rock this night, we will hide ourselves here during to-morrow, and be ready to finish on the following night what we shall not have time to effect during the present one."

"That is an excellent idea," the Jaguar remarked, "and we will immediately carry it into effect."

The young man unfastened the rope round his hips, and after securely attaching one end round a point of rock, and a stone to the other end, that the wind might not blow it away, he let it fall. In a few minutes the rope stiffened—the conspirators watching on the beach had seized it. Ere long a man made his appearance, then a second, and so on till all reached the platform. As they arrived, Lanzi sent them into the grotto.

"And John Davis?" the Jaguar asked.

"He has slipped, and injured his shoulder."

"Have you abandoned him?"

"Certainly not," the cool conspirator said. "Upon leaving I was careful to put the rope several times round his body, in spite of his objections. I only succeeded in overcoming his obstinacy by persuading him that the weight of his body would keep the rope taut."

"Thank you," said the Jaguar. "Now, lads, to work: we must not abandon our brother."

At the chief's order, eight or ten men seized the rope, and the American was soon hoisted to the platform.

"What is the use of taking so much trouble about me?" he said. "I can be of no service to you: on the contrary, I shall only be in the way, and impede your operations."

The Jaguar made no answer, but had him conveyed into the grotto, where he was laid down on the ground. The young chief then collected his comrades, and explained to them how, by a providential accident, Lanzi had discovered the entrance of the grotto. Still it had not yet been explored, and it was of urgency to find out in what direction it ran. So, striking a light, the young man shouted, "Follow me."

All rushed after the Jaguar. The cave took several windings, but, contrary to what is generally found in most natural grottos, it did not appear to have any other arteries save the one in which the conspirators found themselves.

The latter went on, following their leader step by step. The deeper they got into the cavern, the ruder became the ascent. The Jaguar advanced with extreme caution and doubt, for it seemed to him impossible that this passage should be unknown to the commandant of the garrison.

He soon obtained a proof that his surmises were correct, for after marching for a few minutes longer, the conspirators were arrested by an iron-bound door, which barred their way. At a sign from the Jaguar, they remained motionless, with their hands on their dagger-hilts. The moment for action had arrived.

The Jaguar examined the lock for an instant, and then ordered the lights to be put out, which was immediately obeyed, and the conspirators were again in darkness. This door, which was very old, and probably had not been opened for a series of years, could not offer any serious resistance. The young chieftain

thrust the point of his dagger between the bolt and the staple, and pressed on it. The staple fell to the ground, and the door swung open.

It was now about half-past four in the morning, and day was beginning to break. At the end of the passage the Jaguar perceived a motionless shadow leaning against the wall. At an order from his chief, the half-breed glided like a serpent up to this shadow, which was nothing less than a sentry, who was quietly asleep, with his musket by his side, and on coming within reach, the half-breed bounded like a tiger at the throat of the sleeper, whom he threw down without giving him time to utter a cry. The poor fellow was bound and gagged ere he was awake; but the noise, slight as it was, had roused the guard-room. The conspirators, however, had partly armed themselves.

"Fire," the Jaguar thundered, "and then forward!"

Ten muskets were discharged, three officers fell, and the Texans rushed ferociously on the soldiers. The latter, terrified at the attack, and seeing their leaders dead, offered but a weak resistance; after a few minutes of hand-to-hand fighting, sustained rather to save their military honour than in hope of conquering the assailants, they asked leave to capitulate.

CHAPTER XXIII.

EL SALTO DEL FRAYLE.

THE Jaguar's first care, so soon as he was in possession of the fortress, was to have John Davis installed in a comfortable and airy room; then he sent several men to the creek whence the expedition had started, to fetch the clothes and anything the conspirators had left there.

During the works necessitated by the occupation and an exact inspection of the important fortress the Texans had succeeded in seizing, day had broke, and the sun risen. The Jaguar, after taking all the necessary precautions to prevent himself being surprised in his turn, took a telescope, and went up to the platform of the castle. From this point the eye surveyed an immense landscape, and a magnificent panorama was unrolled.

"Lanzi!" the Jaguar suddenly said, as he hurried to him.

"Well!" he answered, raising his head.

"Fetch me the Mexican flag we found in the commandant's room, and hoist it on that staff; but, in order that our comrades may not mistake our meaning, mind and fasten a dagger to the top of the flag. The inhabitants of Galveston will not notice this addition, while our friends will immediately understand what it signifies."

Lanzi punctually carried out the order given him, and five minutes later the Mexican banner, surmounted by a dagger, was majestically floating from the flag-staff. The Jaguar soon obtained the certainty that his signal was understood, for the brig, closely pursued by the corvette, waited till it had come within pistol-shot of the fort ere it tacked, which it assuredly would not have done had there been any cause for fear.

During the greater part of the day the Jaguar followed with the greatest interest the progress of the two ships, and witnessed the final incidents from his observatory. At about two in the afternoon, however, he went down into the interior of the fort, and, after recommending the greatest vigilance to his

friends, he armed himself, threw a zarapé over his shoulders, and quitted the castle. The Jaguar was proceeding to the Salto del Frayle, where, on the previous evening, he had appointed to meet Don Juan Melendez de Gongora.

Not far from Galveston, on the sea-shore, there is a road, whose capricious windings follow the sandy shore.

This road led to the spot called the Monk's Leap, and it was here that the Jaguar had given the meeting to Colonel Don Juan Melendez. The sun had sunk almost level with the horizon when the young man reached the gap. He looked around him, the road was deserted, so he dismounted, hobbled his horse, lay down on the ground, and waited.

He had been there about a quarter of an hour, when the sound of a horse galloping reached his ear; he rose and looked round. He soon saw a horseman turning a corner of the road, and recognised the colonel. On reaching the Jaguar, he bowed and leaped to the ground.

"Pardon me, my friend," he said, "for having kept you waiting, but it is a long distance from Galveston to this spot; and you and your comrades give us so much to do that we have not an instant to ourselves."

"Well, before we part, I will give you some news which, if I am not mistaken, will deeply annoy you."

"What do you mean, my friend? explain yourself."

"Not at this moment. Let us proceed regularly. We shall always have time enough to return to politics."

"That is true; but answer me one question first."

"What is it?"

"Is the news you have to tell me really serious?"

The Jaguar frowned and stamped his foot on the ground with suppressed violence.

"Extremely serious," he said.

For some minutes the colonel's eyes had been fixed on the sea.

"Why," he suddenly said, "look there, my friend."

"What is it?"

"Hang it! I see the *Libertad* corvette, which has first anchored under the guns of the Point Fort, bringing with her a privateer brig, which she has, in all probability, captured off the coast."

"Do you think so?" the Jaguar asked, sarcastically.

"Look for yourself."

"My friend, I am rather like St. Thomas."

"What do you mean?"

That as long as I am not completely convinced, I shall attach but very slight faith to the testimony of my eyesight."

"What can you mean?" asked the colonel.

"Nothing but what I say," the Jaguar answered.

"Still, I fancy I cannot be mistaken. I can see the Mexican flag over the reversed Texan colours."

"It is true," the Jaguar said, coldly, "but what does that prove?"

"What do you say?—'What does that prove?'"

"Yes."

"Are you so ignorant of naval matters, then, as not to know what takes place on board a vessel after an engagement?"

"I beg your pardon, friend, but I know all about it. But I know, too, that what we see may be the result of a stratagem, and that the brig, after capturing the corvette, may have an interest in concealing the fact."

"Come, come," the colonel said, with a laugh, "that is carrying optimism

a little too far. Let us leave the corvette and brig, and return to our own affairs."

"Well, I think you are in the right; for, judging from the turn the conversation has taken, we should presently be unable to understand one another at all."

The young men yielded involuntarily to the intoxicating charm of this exquisite evening; yielding to their thoughts, neither dreamed of resuming a conversation suddenly broken off by a bitter remark. For a long time they walked on thus, till they reached an angle in the road, where the track they were following divided into several branches. Here they halted.

"We must separate here, Don Juan," the Jaguar said, "for we probably do not follow the same road."

"That is true, friend, and I regret it," the colonel answered, sadly, "for I should be so happy if I had you constantly by my side."

"Thanks, friend, but you know that is impossible; let us, therefore, profit by the few moments left us to be together. Well, what have you done?"

"Nothing, alas! for a soldier is the slave of discipline. I have, therefore, been unable to obtain any information. Have you been more fortunate?"

"I can hardly say, yet; still I hope. Tranquil has this very night to give me certain information, which will perfect that I have myself obtained."

"And is Tranquil here?"

"He arrived to-day, but I have not yet been able to see him."

"Then you imagine——?" the colonel said, eagerly.

"This is what I have succeeded in finding out. Remark that I assert nothing; I am at this moment merely the echo of certain rumours."

"No matter; speak, my friend, in Heaven's name."

"About six weeks ago, according to what my spies tell me, a strange man arrived in this country, bringing a girl with him. This man has purchased a rancho, of no great value, situated a few leagues from here, nearly on the seashore. He paid cash for it, shut himself up in the rancho with the girl, and since then no one has seen them. The man has immured himself in his property, to which nobody has admission; but whether this man be the White Scalper, and the maiden Carmela, no one is able to state positively. Several times I have prowled round the abode of this mysterious being, but have not succeeded in seeing him: windows and doors are constantly closed, nothing is heard of what takes place in this strange house, which, through its isolated position, is, to a certain extent, protected from indiscreet visitors. This is what I had to tell you, perhaps to-morrow I shall have learned more."

"No," Don Juan answered, pensively, "that man cannot be the White Scalper, or the maiden Carmela. Only one man, in my opinion, could put you on the trail of her we have so unfortunately lost."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Loyal Heart."

"That is true. He was brought up by the Indians, and one of their tribes has adopted him. He would be better able than anybody to supply us with information."

"Why have you not applied to him, then?"

"For the very simple reason that, on the day after the capture of the Larch-tree hacienda, Loyal Heart left us to return to his tribe."

"That is annoying," the colonel said thoughtfully. "I know not why, but I feel convinced that this hunter may prove extremely useful to us in our search for the unfortunate Carmela."

"Perhaps you are right, colonel. This night, as I told you, I am to see Tranquil, and shall have a serious explanation with him."

"Insist, I beg, friend, on establishing a friendly connection with Loyal Heart."
 "I shall not fail; besides, Tranquil is sure to know where to find him."

"That is probable. Now, I can speak to you with open heart, my friend. Honour alone has hitherto kept me at my post; I desire to recover my liberty, and only await an honourable occasion to send in my resignation. On the day when I am free, and that day is approaching, I hope, I will join you, and then we shall find Carmela again, even at the risk of my life."

The colonel uttered these words with a fire and animation which made his friend start involuntarily, and aroused in his heart a deep feeling of jealousy. Still, the Jaguar had sufficient power over himself to conceal the emotion he felt.

"May Heaven grant that it may speedily be so, my friend. What could we two not do?"

"Then you intend to make the expedition you told me of this night?" the colonel continued.

"I shall be present, but another person will direct it."

"Tranquil is Carmela's father, and I must yield to his wishes."

"That is true. Now, when and how shall we meet again? I have the greatest desire to learn what may occur to-night; whatever be the result of the expedition, I trust to be informed of what you have done. Unfortunately, I fear it will be very difficult for us to meet."

"Why so?"

"Why, my friend, you know the truce made between you and General Rubio expires to-night."

"I defy him to come and take me at the spot where I shall be within an hour, and where I shall be delighted to welcome you, if you are inclined to pay me a visit."

"And where is this privileged spot, my friend?"

"The Fort of the Point."

"What!" the colonel said, suddenly stopping and looking him in the face; "of course you are joking."

"Not the least in the world."

"What! you give me the meeting at the fort? Oh, you must be mad, my friend!"

"Remember that the fort has been in my hands for the past twelve hours," the Jaguar coldly interrupted him. "I surprised it last night."

"Ah!" the colonel exclaimed, in stupor.

"Did I not tell you that I had serious news to impart to you?" the young man continued; "would you like, now, to learn the second item?"

"The second!" the colonel repeated, utterly astounded; "and what can the second item be?"

"The second item is this: the *Libertad* corvette has been boarded by the privateer brig, with which it anchored at sunset beneath the guns of the fort." At this unexpected revelation the colonel staggered like a drunken man.

"Woe, woe!" he exclaimed in a choking voice.

"Alas! my friend," said the Jaguar, gently, "it is the fortune of war."

"Galveston!" the colonel said in despair, "that city which the general has sworn never to surrender."

After a moment's silence, the colonel mounted his horse.

"Let me go," he said; "I must immediately impart these frightful news to the governor."

"Go, my friend," the Jaguar answered; "but, remember that you will find me at the Fort of the Point."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LANDING.

IMMEDIATELY on reaching his anchorage, Captain Johnson, after conversing for a moment privately with El Alferez, gave orders that Commandant Rodriguez and his officers should be brought into his presence. The commandant, despite the politeness with which he had been treated, and the kindness the privateer's men had shown him, could not forgive them the way in which they had seized his vessel ; he was sad, and had hitherto only answered the questions asked him by disdainful silence, or insulting monosyllables. When the officers of the corvette were assembled in the cabin, Captain Johnson, turning politely to the Mexicans, said :

"Gentlemen, I am really most sorry for what has occurred. I should be glad to set you at liberty immediately, but your commandant's formal refusal to pledge himself not to serve against us for a year and a day obliges me, to my great regret, to keep you prisoners, at least temporarily. However, gentlemen, be assured that you will be treated as caballeros, and everything done to alleviate this temporary captivity."

The officers, and even the commandant, bowed their thanks, and the captain continued :

"All your property has been placed in the boat I have ordered to convey you ashore. If nothing retains you here, be kind enough to get ready to land."

"Would it be indiscreet, captain, to ask you whether you have given orders to have us taken?" Commandant Rodriguez asked.

"Not at all, commandant," the captain replied ; "you are about to be taken to the Fort of the Point, whose walls will serve as your prison, until fresh orders."

"What!" the old sailor exclaimed in astonishment; "the Fort of the Point?"

"Yes," the captain answered with a smile; "the fort which some of my friends seized, while I had the honour of boarding your fine corvette, commandant."

The captain could have gone on talking thus for some time: the old officer, confounded by what he had just heard, was incapable of connecting two ideas. At length, he let his head fall wearily on his chest, and making his officers a sign to follow him, went on deck. A boat, with a crew of ten men, was balancing at the starboard accommodation ladder, which the commandant, still silent, entered, and his staff followed his example.

"Push off!" El Alferez ordered, who was holding the yoke lines.

The boat started and speedily disappeared. For some minutes the cadenced sound of the oars dipping in the water could be heard, and then all became silent again. The captain had watched the departure of his prisoners; when the boat had disappeared in the gloom, he gave Master Lovel orders to weigh and stand out to sea, and then returned to his cabin, where a man was waiting for him. It was Tranquil, the old tigero.

"Well!" the hunter asked.

"They have gone, thank Heaven!" the captain said.

"When shall we land?"

"This night; but is your information positive?"

"I believe so."

"Well, we shall soon know how matters stand."

"May Heaven grant that we succeed!"

"Let us hope it. Do you think the coast is guarded?"

"I fear it, for your vessel must have been signalled all along the shore."

"Do you know whether the Mexicans have other ships observing the ports, in addition to the corvette?"

"I think they have three more, but smaller than the *Libertad*."

"Hang it all! we must act prudently, then; however, whatever may happen, I will not desert so old a friend as yourself when unfortunate. We have still three hours before us, so try and sleep a little, for we shall have a tough job."

Tranquil smiled at this recommendation; but to please his friend, who had already laid himself down in his bunk, in the position of a man preparing to sleep, he wrapped himself in his zarapé and closed his eyes.

The night, which at the beginning had been very bright and clear, had suddenly become dark and stormy; black clouds surcharged with electricity covered the whole of the sky; the breeze moaned sadly in the rigging, and mingled with the dash of the waves against the sides of the vessel. The brig was sailing slowly close to the wind, the only sails it carried being double-reefed topsails, the fore staysail, and the spanker.

At the moment when the helmsman struck the two double strokes on the bell, indicating ten o'clock, Captain Johnson and Tranquil appeared on deck. The captain was dressed in a thick blue pilot-coat, a leathern belt, through which were passed a cutlass, a pair of pistols, and an axe, was fastened round his waist; a cloak was thrown over his shoulders, and a broad-brimmed felt hat completely concealed his features. The Canadian wore his hunter's garb, though, through the dangerous nature of the affair, he had added a brace of pistols to his ordinary armament.

The captain's orders have been carried out with that minute consciousness which Master Lovel displayed in everything connected with duty. The boarding-netting was braced up, and the running rigging secured as if for action. At the starboard ladder the long boat was tossing with its crew of thirty men, all armed to the teeth, and holding their oars aloft ready to dash into the water. They were, however, muffled, so as to stifle the sound of rowing, and foil the vigilance of the Mexicans.

"That is well, lads," the captain said, "let us be off. Mind, father," he added, turning to Father Lovel, "that you keep a good watch. If we are not on board again by four in the morning, stand out to sea, and do not trouble yourself further about us; for it will be useless to wait for us longer, as we shall be prisoners of the Mexicans; and any lengthened stay in these waters might compromise the safety of the brig. Be of good cheer, though, for I have hopes of success."

And after kindly pressing the old sailor's hand, he went down to the boat, seated himself in the stern sheets by the side of the hunter, took up the yoke lines, and said in a low voice, "Push off!"

At this command the painter was cast off, the oars dashed together into the sea, and the boat started. When it had disappeared in the fog, Master Lovel ran at full speed to the stern of the brig, and leaned over the taffrail. "Are you there?" he said.

"Yes," a suppressed voice answered him.

"Get ready," the master added, and then said to an old sailor, "You know what I have to tell you, Wells; I count on you thoroughly."

"All right, master," the sailor replied, "you can cut your cable without fear, I will keep a look-out."

"All right; get in, men, and double-bank the oars."

Some forty sailors, who were well armed, like their predecessors, let themselves down, one after the other, by a rope that hung over the taffrail, and got into a second boat, which Master Lovel had ordered to be got ready, and of which he took the command. He started at once, and steered after the captain's pinnace, whose direction he was pretty well acquainted with, saying every now and then to the rowers, in order to increase their speed, "Give way, my lads, give way, all!" and he added, as he chewed his enormous quid, with a cunning smile, "It was very likely I should let my old fellow have his face scored by those brigands of Mexicans, who are all as crafty as caimans."

So soon as he had left the ship, the captain, leaving on his right hand a small fishing-village, whose lights he saw flashing through the darkness, steered for a jutting-out point, where he probably hoped to disembark in safety. After rowing for about three-quarters of an hour, a black line began to be vaguely designed on the horizon in front of the boat. The captain gave his men a sign to rest on their oars for a moment, and taking up a long night-glass, he carefully examined the coast. In two or three minutes he shut up the glass again, and ordered his men to give way.

All at once the keel of the pinnace grated on the sand: they had reached land. After hurriedly exploring the neighbourhood, the crew leaped ashore, leaving only one man as boat-keeper, who at once pushed off. The captain having assured himself that, for the present at any rate, he had nothing to fear, concealed his men behind some rocks, and then addressed Tranquil.

"It is now your turn, old hunter," he said.

"Good!" the latter replied, not adding another word.

He left his hiding-place, and walked forward, with a pistol in one hand and a tomahawk in the other, stopping at intervals to look around him. On getting about one hundred yards from the spot where the landing was effected, the hunter stopped, and began gently whistling the first bars of a Canadian air. Another whistle answered his, and finished the tune he had purposely broken off. Footsteps were heard, and a man showed himself. It was Quoniam the negro.

"Here I am," he said. "Where are your men?"

"Hidden behind the rocks close by."

"Call them up, for we have not a moment to lose."

Tranquil clapped his hands twice, and a moment later the captain and his men had rejoined him.

"Where is the person we have come to deliver concealed?" the captain asked.

"At a rancho about two miles from here. I will lead you to it."

There was a moment's silence, during which the captain studied the negro's noble face, his black flashing eye, which glistened with boldness and honour; and he asked himself whether such a man could be a traitor? Quoniam seemed to read his thoughts, for he said to him, as he laid his hand on the Canadian's shoulder—

"If I had intended to betray you, it would have been done ere now. Trust to me, captain, I owe my life to Tranquil. I almost witnessed the birth of the maiden you wish to save. My friendship and gratitude answer to you for my fidelity. Let us start."

And without saying anything further, he placed himself at the head of the band.

While the incidents we have just described were taking place on the beach, two persons, male and female, seated in a room, modestly though comfortably

furnished, were holding a conversation, which, judging from the angry expression of their faces, seemed to be most stormy. These two persons were Carmela and the White Scalper.

Carmela was half reclining in a hammock; she was pale and suffering, her features were worn, and her red eyes showed that she had been weeping.

"Take care, Carmela!" he said, as he suddenly halted in front of the young woman, "you know that I crush all who resist me. For the last time I ask you Will you tell me the reason of your constant refusals?"

"Come," she continued, "this farce wearies me, so let us bring it to a finale. I know you too well now, not to be aware that you would not hesitate to proceed to odious extremities, if I would not submit to your wishes. Since you insist on it, I will explain my thoughts to you. You ask me if I hate you? No, I do not hate you, I despise you!"

"Silence, wretched girl!"

"Yourself ordered me to speak, and I shall not be silent till I have told you all. Yes, I despise you, because, instead of respecting a poor girl, whom you, coward as you are, carried off from her relations and friends, you torture her, and become her executioner. I despise you, because you are a man without a soul; an old man who might be my father, and yet you do not blush to ask me to love you, under some wretched pretext of my resemblance with some woman I have no doubt you killed."

"Carmela!"

"Lastly, I despise you because you are a furious brute, who only possess one human feeling, 'the love of murder!' because there is nothing sacred in your sight, and if I were weak enough to consent to your wishes, you would make me die of despair, by taking a delight in breaking my heart."

"Take care, Carmela!" he exclaimed furiously.

"I defy you, coward who threaten a woman!"

"Help!" the White Scalper exclaimed, with a yell.

All at once the window was noisily burst open and Tranquil entered.

"I think you called, senor?" he said, as he leaped into the room,

"My father! my father!" the poor girl shrieked, as she threw herself into his arms; "you have come at last!"

The White Scalper, utterly astonished and startled by the unexpected appearance of the hunter, looked around him in alarm, and could not succeed in regaining his coolness. The Canadian, after lovingly replying to the maiden's warm greeting, laid her gently on the hammock, and then turned to the White Scalper.

"I ask your pardon, senor," he said with perfect ease, "for not having advised you of my visit; but you are aware we are not friends, and, as it is possible that if I had written, you would not have received me, I preferred bringing matters to the point."

"One moment, senor," the Scalper exclaimed; "you have learned how to enter this house, but you do not know how to leave it."

And seizing two pistols lying on a table, he pointed them at the hunter, while shouting—"Help! help!"

Tranquil quietly raised his rifle to his shoulder.

"I should be delighted by your showing me the road," he said peaceably.

A dozen blacks and Mexicans rushed into the room.

"Ah, ah!" said the Scalper, "I fancy I have you at last, old Tiger-killer."

"Nonsense," a mocking voice replied; "not yet."

At this moment the captain and his men dashed through the window which had afforded the Canadian a passage into the room, and uttered a fearful yell.

An indescribable medley and confusion then began : the lights were extinguished, and the servants, mostly unarmed, and not knowing with how many enemies they had to deal, fled in all directions. The Scalper was carried away by the stream of fugitives. The Texans took advantage of the stupor of their enemy to evacuate the rancho, and effect their retreat.

"Make haste ! make haste !" the captain shouted ; "who knows whether we may not be crushed by superior forces in an instant ?"

At his orders, the sailors, taking the maiden in their midst, ran off in the direction of the sea-shore. In the distance, drums and bugles could be heard calling the people under arms, and on the horizon the black outline of a large body of troops hurrying up, with the evident intention of cutting off the retreat of the Texans, could be distinguished. Panting and exhausted, the latter still ran on ; they could see the coast ; a few minutes more and they would reach it. All at once a band, commanded by the White Scalper, dashed upon them, shouting—"Down with the Texans ! kill them ! kill them !"

"Oh, my God !" Carmela exclaimed, "will you abandon us ?"

"Lads," the captain said, addressing his sailors, "we cannot talk about conquering, but we can die."

"We will, captain," the sailors answered.

"Father," said Dona Carmela, "will you let me fall alive into the hands of that tiger ?"

"No," said Tranquil, as he kissed her pale forehead ; "here is my dagger."

"Thanks !" she replied. "Oh, now I am certain of dying free."

Lest they should be surrounded, the Texans leant their backs against the rock, and awaited with levelled bayonets the attack of the Mexicans.

"Surrender, dogs !" shouted the Scalper.

"Nonsense !" the captain answered ; "you must be mad, *senor*. Do men like us surrender ?"

"Forward !" the Scalper shouted.

The Mexicans rushed on their enemies with indescribable rage. An heroic and gigantic struggle then began, a combat of three hundred men against thirty : a horrible and merciless carnage, in which none demanded quarter, while the Texans, certain of all falling, would not succumb till buried under a pile of hostile corpses. After twenty minutes, that seemed an age, only twelve Texans remained on their legs. The captain, Tranquil, Quoniam, and nine sailors, remained alone, accomplishing prodigies of valour.

"At last !" the Scalper shouted, as he dashed forward.

"Not yet," Tranquil said, as he dealt a blow at him with his axe.

The Scalper avoided the blow by leaping on one side, and replied with his machete ; Tranquil, wounded, fell on his knee, crying, "She is lost ! my God, she is lost !"

CHAPTER XXV.

FORWARD !

In the meanwhile Master Lovel made his men row vigorously, in order to reach land as soon as possible. But when he at last reached the shore the captain had landed long before.

The old sailor had his boat tied up to the captain's, in order that they could be used if required, and then advanced cautiously inland. He had not proceeded

many yards, however, ere a tremendous noise reached his ears, and he saw the sailors who accompanied the captain debouch from the hollow way in disorder, and closely pursued by Mexican soldiers.

Master Lovel did not lose his head under these circumstances: instead of rushing into the medley, he ambushed his men behind a clump of trees that stood a short distance off.

The Texans, with their back to the rock, not ten yards from the sea, were fighting desperately against an immense number of enemies. A minute later, and all would have been over, but suddenly the cry of "Forward! *Texas y Libertad!*" was raised in the rear of the Mexicans, accompanied by a tremendous shout, and a deadly discharge, almost at point-blank range, scattered terror and disorder through their ranks. It was Master Lovel effecting his diversion, in order to save his captain.

The Mexicans, who already believed themselves victors, were terrified at this unforeseen attack, which, owing to the vigour with which it was carried out, they supposed to be made by a considerable body of these freebooters, commanded by the Jaguar, whose reputation was already immense in the ranks of the American army. They were finally seized with a panic terror which their officers could not succeed in mastering, and broke and fled in all directions, throwing their arms away.

The Texans, revived by the prudential arrival of the old sailor, and excited by their captain's voice, redoubled their efforts. Tranquil tied a handkerchief round his thigh, and supported by Quoniam, who, during the action, had not left him for an instant, he retreated to the boats, leading Carmela, and followed by the captain and his brave sailors. The latter, like lions at bay, turned at each instant to dash with axes and bayonets at the few soldiers their officers had succeeded in rallying.

Still fighting, the sailors at length reached the boats prepared for their reception. Captain Johnson ordered the wounded to be placed in the launch, and getting into the other boat with Tranquil and Quoniam, and the sound men, he put off from the shore, towing the boat that served as an ambulance. This daring retreat, effected under the enemy's fire, was carried out with admirable precision and skill.

Ere long the coast disappeared in the fog, the shouts of the enemy became less distinct, the shots ceased, the light flashing on the shore died out, and all grew silent again.

"Are we really out of danger, father?" the maiden asked with a shudder of fear.

"Yes, my child; keep your spirits up," the hunter answered, "we are now in safety."

At this very moment the sailors, as if wishing to confirm the Canadian's assurance, or perhaps with the wish to mock the enemies they had so barely escaped, struck up one of those songs which serve to mark time, and the words of which each repeats as he lays out on his oars. Master Lovel, after turning and returning several times the enormous quid that swelled his right cheek, made a signal to the crew of the pinnace, and struck up in a rough voice a stanza, which all repeated in chorus after him. This song, which was as interminable as a sailor's yarn, would, in all probability, have lasted much longer, if the captain had not suddenly ordered silence.

"Some new danger?" Tranquil inquired anxiously.

"Perhaps so," the captain replied, who had for some time been scanning the horizon with a frowning brow.

"What do you mean?" the hunter asked.

"Look!" the captain said, extending his hand in the direction of the fishing-village.

Tranquil hastily took up the night-glass: a dozen large boats, crowded with soldiers, were leaving a small creek, and pulling out to sea. The water was lumpy, the breeze blew strongly, and the over-crowded long-boat advanced but slowly, as it was compelled to tow the pinnace. The peril which they fancied they had escaped burst out again in a different shape, and this time assumed really terrific proportions.

The brig, whose tall masts were visible, was, it is true, only two cables' length, at the most, from the Texan boats, but the few men left on board were not nearly sufficient to make the requisite manoeuvres to enable the brig to help its boats effectually. The position grew with each moment more critical.

"Lads," said the captain, "the ten best swimmers among you will jump into the sea, and go to the ship with me."

"Captain," the hunter exclaimed, "what do you propose doing?"

"To save you," he simply answered.

"Oh, oh!" Master Lovel said hastily, "I will not allow such an act of madness."

"Silence, sir," the captain interrupted him rudely. "I am the sole commander."

"But you are wounded!" the master objected. In fact, Captain Johnson had received an axe-stroke.

"Silence! I tell you. I allow no remarks."

The old sailor bowed his head, and wiped away a tear. After squeezing the hunter's hand, the captain and his ten sailors leaped boldly into the sea, and disappeared in the darkness. At the news of fresh danger, Carmela had fallen, completely overwhelmed, in the bottom of the boat. Master Lovel, leaning out, tried to discover his chief. Heavy tears coursed down his bronzed cheeks, and all his limbs were agitated by a convulsive quivering. The Mexicans approached nearer and nearer; they were already close enough for the number of their boats to be distinguished, and a schooner was already leaving the creek, and coming up under press of canvas, to ensure the success of the attack.

The sailors burst into a shout of joy, and laying on their oars, redoubled their efforts. A frightful discharge answered them, and the balls flattened against the sides of the pinnace and dashed up the water around. The Mexicans, who had come within range, opened a terrible fire on the Texans, but the latter did not reply.

A dull noise was heard, followed by cries of despair and imprecations, and a black mass passed to windward of the long-boat. It was the brig coming to the assistance of its crew, and in passing it sunk and dispersed the enemy's boats.

When she set foot on the deck of the brig, Carmela fainted, succumbing to her emotions. Tranquil raised her in his arms, and, aided by Quoniam and the captain, carried her down to the cabin.

"Captain," a sailor shouted, "the Mexicans!"

While the Texans were engaged in taking their wounded aboard, feeling convinced that the Mexican boats had been all, or, at any rate, the majority of them, sunk by the brig, they had not dreamed of watching an enemy they supposed crushed. The latter had cleverly profited by this negligence to rally, and collecting beneath the bows of the brig, had boldly boarded her, by climbing up the main-chains, the sprit-sails, and any ropes' ends they had been able to seize. Fortunately, Master Lovel had the boarding nettings triced up on the previous evening, and through this wise precaution the desperate surprise of the Mexicans did not meet with the success they anticipated for it.

The Texans, obeying the voice of their captain, resumed their weapons, and rushed on the Mexicans, who were already all but masters of the fore-part of the ship. Tranquil, Quoniam, Captain Johnson, and Lovel, armed with axes, had flown to the front rank, and by their example excited the crew to do their duty properly. There, on a limited space of ten square yards at the most, one of those fearful naval combats without order or tactics began, in which rage and brutal strength represent science. A horrible struggle, a fearful carnage, with pikes, axes, and cutlasses; a struggle in which each wound is mortal, and which recalls those hideous combats of the worst days of the middle ages, when brute strength alone was the law.

The White Scalper had never before fought with such obstinacy. Furious at the loss of the prey he had so audaciously carried off, half mad with rage, he seemed to multiply himself, rushing incessantly with savage yells into the densest part of the fight, seeking Carmela, and longing to kill the man who had so bravely torn her from him. Accident seemed for a moment to smile on him, by bringing him face to face with the captain.

"Now for my turn," he exclaimed, with a ferocious shout of joy.

The captain raised his axe.

"No no!" said Tranquil, as he threw himself hurriedly before him; "this victim is reserved for me; I must kill this human-faced tiger. Besides," he added, "it is my profession to kill wild beasts."

"Ah!" the White Scalper said; "it is really fatality which brings you once more face to face with me. Well, be it so! I will settle with you first, the others after."

"It is you who will die, villain!" the Canadian replied. "Ah! you carried off my daughter and fancied yourself well concealed, did you? But I was on your trail; for the last three months I have been following you step by step, and watching for the favourable moment for vengeance."

On hearing these words the Scalper rushed furiously on his enemy. The latter did not make a movement to avoid him; on the contrary, he seized him in his powerful arms, and tried to throw him down, while stabbing him in the loins with his dagger. These two men, with flashing eyes and foaming lips, animated by an implacable hatred, intertwined breast to breast, face to face, each trying to kill his adversary, caring little to live provided that his enemy died, resembled two wild beasts determined to destroy each other.

Texans and Mexicans had ceased fighting as if by common accord, and remained horrified spectators of this atrocious combat. At length the Canadian, who had been severely wounded before, fell, dragging his enemy down with him. The latter uttered a yell of triumph, which was soon converted into a groan of despair. Quoniam rushed madly upon him, but, unfortunately, he had miscalculated his distance, and they both fell into the sea, which closed over them with a hollow and ill-omened sound.

The Mexicans, deprived of their chief, now only thought of flight, and rushed in mad disorder to their boats; a moment later they had all quitted the brig. Quoniam reappeared, but exhausted and dripping with water. He tottered a few paces, and fell by the side of Tranquil, to whom Carmela and the captain were paying the most assiduous attention. A few minutes later the hunter felt strong enough to try and rise.

"Well," he asked Quoniam, "is he dead?"

"I believe so," the negro replied, as he offered him a small object he held in his hand.

The Canadian uttered a cry of surprise on seeing it.

"Where did you find this?" he asked anxiously.

"When I rushed on that man, I know not how it was, but this chain and the articles attached to it were placed, as it were, in my hand. When I fell into the sea I clung to the chain; there it is."

Tranquil, after again examining the mysterious object, concealed it in his breast, and gave vent to a profound sigh. All at once Carmela started up in horror.

"Oh, look, look, father!" she shrieked; "woe, woe, we are lost!"

The hunter started at the sound of the girl's voice, and his eyes filled with tears.

"What is the matter?" he asked, in a weak voice.

"The matter is," the captain said rudely, "that unless a miracle take place, we are really lost this time."

And he pointed to some thirty armed boats, which were pulling up and converging round the brig, so as to enclose it in a circle, whence it would be impossible for it to escape.

"Oh, fate is against us!" Carmela exclaimed in despair.

"No, it is impossible," Tranquil said quickly; "God will not abandon us thus."

"We are saved!" Master Lovel shouted; "we are saved! Look, look! the boats are turning back!"

The crew burst into a shout of joy and triumph; in the beams of the rising sun, the *Libertad* corvette could be seen passing through Galveston Straits, hardly two cannon-shots' distance from the brig. The Mexican boats pulled at full speed in the direction of land, and soon all had disappeared. The brig drifted down to the corvette, and both returned to their old anchorage.

The two ships had scarce let their anchors fall, ere a boat came alongside the brig, from the fort, containing the Jaguar and El Alferez.

The success of the two hazardous expeditions attempted by the Texans had given the cause they defended a great impulse. In a few hours the revolt had become a revolution, and the insurgent chiefs men whose existence must henceforth be recognised. The Jaguar desired to push matters on actively, and wished to profit by the probable discouragement of the Mexicans to secure the surrender of the town without a blow.

In his conversation with Colonel Melendez, the young chief had purposely startled him with the news of the success of the two expeditions, calculating for the success of future operations on the stupor General Rubio would experience on being told of them. But ere undertaking anything, the Jaguar desired a conference with his friends, in order to settle definitively the way in which he must behave under such serious circumstances, as he was not at all anxious to assume the responsibility of the whole undertaking. This was acting not only with prudence, but also with perfect self-denial.

But as the heart of even the purest and most honourable man is never exempt from those weaknesses inherent in human nature, the Jaguar, though perhaps not daring to avow it to himself, had another motive that urged him to go aboard the brig so speedily. This motive, of a thoroughly private nature, was the desire to learn as soon as possible the result of the expedition attempted by Captain Johnson and Tranquil against the rancho of the White Scalper.

Hence, the young man had scarce reached the deck, ere, without returning the salutes of his friends who hurried to greet him at the ladder, he inquired after Tranquil. The captain gave him no other answer than a sign to follow. The young man, not understanding this reserve, though feeling seriously alarmed, went below, where he saw Tranquil reclining in a berth, and a weeping female seated on a chair by his side. The Jaguar turned pale, for in the female he

recognised Dona Carmela. At the sound of his approaching footsteps, the maiden raised her head.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands with joy, "it is you! you have come at last, then!"

"Thanks, Carmela," he replied in a gasping voice; "thanks for this kindly greeting; it proves to me that you have not forgotten me."

"Forgot you, to whom, next to my father, I owe everything! Oh, you know that was impossible."

"Thank you, once again. You do not, you cannot know how happy you render me at this moment, Carmela. My whole life, employed in your service, would not suffice to repay the good you do me. Brave Tranquil, I felt sure that he would succeed!"

"Alas, my friend, this success costs him dear."

"What do you mean? I trust that he is not dangerously wounded?"

"I fear the contrary, my friend."

"Oh! we will save him."

"Come hither, Jaguar," the hunter said in a low voice; "give me your hand, that I may press it in mine."

The young man walked quickly up to him.

"Oh, with all my heart!" he said.

"The affair was a tough one, my friend," the Canadian went on; "that man is a lion."

"Yes, yes, he is a rude adversary; but you got the better of him at last?"

"Thanks to Heaven, yes; but I shall keep his mark all my life, if God permit me to rise again."

"Nonsense, who knows? any wound that does not kill is soon cured, the Indians say, and they are right. And what has become of that man?"

"In all probability he is dead," Tranquil said.

"That is all for the best."

At this moment Captain Johnson opened the door.

"A boat, bearing a flag of truce, is hailing the brig; what is to be done?" he asked.

"Receive it, Sangre de Dios! my dear Johnson. This boat, if I am not mistaken, is a bearer of good news."

"Our friends would like you to be present to hear the proposals which will doubtless be made."

"What do you say, Tranquil?" the young chief asked, turning to the old hunter.

"Go, my boy, where duty calls you," the latter answered; "you will not be away long."

"Certainly not, and so soon as I am at liberty again I will return to your side, but merely to have you carried ashore; your condition demands attention you cannot obtain here."

"I accept, my friend; the more so as I believe the land air will do me good."

"That is settled, then," the Jaguar said, joyously.

"All right," Tranquil replied, and fell back in his berth.

The young man, after bowing to Carmela, who returned the salute with a gentle and sad glance, left the cabin with the captain, and returned on deck.

[In our next volume, "*THE WHITE SCALPER*," we shall again come across all the characters of this history, and many mysteries will be cleared up.]

THE END.

THE
WHITE SCALPER

A Story

BY
GUSTAVE AIMARD

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AND ALL BOOKSELLERS

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NOTICE.

GUSTAVE AIMARD was the adopted son of one of the most powerful Indian tribes, with whom he lived for more than fifteen years in the heart of the Prairies, sharing their dangers and their combats, and accompanying them everywhere, rifle in one hand and tomahawk in the other. In turn squatter, hunter, trapper, warrior, and miner, **GUSTAVE AIMARD** has traversed America from the highest peaks of the Cordilleras to the ocean shores, living from hand to mouth, happy for the day, careless of the morrow. Hence it is that **GUSTAVE AIMARD** only describes his own life. The Indians of whom he speaks he has known—the manners he depicts are his own.

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THE WHITE SCALPER

CHAPTER I.

A RECONNOISSANCE.

COLONEL MELENDEZ, after leaving the Jaguar, galloped with his head afire, and panting chest, along the road to Galveston. But it is a long journey from the Salto del Frayle to the town. While galloping, the colonel reflected; and the more he did so, the more impossible did it appear to him that the Jaguar had told the truth. In fact, how could it be supposed that this partisan, brave and rash though he was, would have dared to attack, at the head of a handful of adventurers, a well-equipped corvette, manned by a numerous crew, and commanded by one of the best officers in the Mexican navy? The capture of the fort seemed even more improbable.

Reflecting thus, the colonel had gradually slackened his horse's speed; the animal, feeling that it was no longer urged, had passed from a gallop into a canter, then a trot, and, by a perfectly natural transition, fell into a walk, with drooping head, and snapping at the blades of grass within its reach.

Night had set in; a complete silence brooded over the country, only broken by the hollow moan of the sea as it rolled over the shingle. The colonel was following a track which greatly shortened the distance separating him from Galveston. This path, much used by day, was at night completely deserted; the ranchos that stood here and there were shut up, and no light gleamed through their narrow windows, for the fishermen, fatigued by the rude toil of the day, had retired to bed.

The young officer's horse, which had more and more slackened its pace, emboldened by impunity, at length stopped near a scrubby bush, whose leaves it began nibbling. This immobility aroused the colonel from his reverie, and he looked about him to see where he was. Although the obscurity was very dense, it was easy for him to perceive that he was still far from his destination. About a musket-shot ahead was a rancho, whose windows allowed a thin pencil of light to filter through the interstices of the shutters. The colonel struck his repeater, and found it was midnight. To go on would be madness; the more so, as it would be impossible for him to find a boat. Greatly annoyed at this obstacle, which, supposing the Jaguar's revelations to be true, might entail serious consequences, the young officer resolved on pushing on to the rancho before him, and once there, try to obtain means to cross the bay.

After drawing his cloak tightly round him, to protect himself from the damp sea air, the colonel caught up his reins again, and giving his horse the spur, trotted sharply towards the rancho. The traveller speedily reached it, but, when only a few paces from it, instead of riding straight up to the door, he dismounted, fastened his horse to a larch-tree, and, after placing his pistols in his belt, made a rather long circuit, and stealthily crept up to the window of the rancho.

The colonel, being dressed in a Mexican uniform, was bound to act with extreme reserve.

This rancho was rather large; it had not that appearance of poverty and neglect which are found only too often in the houses of Spanish-American *campesinos*. It was a square house, with a roof in the Italian fashion, having in front an azotea-covered portillo. The white-washed walls were an agreeable contrast to the young vines, and other plants which ran over it. This rancho was not enclosed by walls: a thick hedge alone defended the approaches. The dependencies of the house were vast, and well kept up. All proved that the owner of this mansion carried things on grandly.

The colonel, as we have said, had softly approached one of the windows. The shutters were carefully closed, but not so carefully as not to let it be seen that some one was up inside. In vain did the colonel, though, place his eye at the slit, for he could see nothing. If he could not see, however, he could hear, and the first words that reached his ear probably appeared to him very serious, for he redoubled his attention, in order to lose no portion of the conversation.

In a rather small room, dimly lighted by a smoky candle, four men, with gloomy faces and ferocious glances, dressed in the garb of *campesinos*, were assembled. Three of them, seated on butaccas and equipals, were listening, with their guns between their legs, to the fourth, who, with his arms behind his back, was walking rapidly up and down.

The broad brims of the vicuna hats which the three first wore, and the obscurity prevailing in the room, only allowed their faces to be dimly seen. The fourth, on the contrary, was bare-headed; he was a man of about forty, tall, and well built; his muscular limbs denoted a far from common strength, and a forest of black and curly hair fell on his wide shoulders. He had a lofty forehead, aquiline nose, and black and piercing eyes; while the lower part of his face was hidden by a long and thick beard. There was in the appearance of this man something bold and haughty, which inspired respect, and almost fear.

At this moment he seemed to be in a tremendous passion; his eyebrows were contracted, his cheeks livid, and, at times, when he yielded to the emotion he tried in vain to restrain, his eye flashed so fiercely that it forced his three hearers to bow their heads humbly, and they seemed to be his inferiors.

"No," he said, in a powerful voice, "things cannot go on thus any longer. You dishonour the holy cause we are defending by revolting acts of cruelty, which injure us in the opinion of the population, and authorise all the calumnies our enemies spread with reference to us. It is not by imitating our oppressors that we shall succeed in proving to the masses that we really wish their welfare."

The three men, who had been tolerably quiet up to this moment, then rose, protesting simultaneously that they were innocent of the crimes imputed to them.

"I do not believe you," he continued passionately; "I do not believe you, because I can prove the utter truth of the accusation I am now making. You deny it, as I expected. Your part was ready traced, and you might be expected to act so: all other paths were closed to you. Only one of you, the youngest, the one who perhaps had the greatest right to employ reprisals, has always remained equal to his mission; and, though our enemies have tried several times to brand him, he has ever remained firm, as the Mexicans themselves know as well as I do: it is

the Jaguar. Only yesterday, at the head of some of our men, he accomplished one of the most glorious and extraordinary exploits."

All pressed round the stranger, and eagerly questioned him.

"What need for me to tell you what has occurred? You will know it within a few hours. Suffice it for you to know for the present, that the consequence of the Jaguar's daring achievement is the immediate surrender of Galveston."

"Then we triumph!" one of the campesinos exclaimed.

"Yes; but all is not over yet: if we have succeeded in taking the town of Galveston from the Mexicans, they have fifty others left. Hence, believe me, instead of giving way to immoderate joy, and imprudent confidence, redouble, on the contrary, your efforts and self-denial, if you wish to remain victors to the end."

"But what is to be done to obtain the result we desire as much as you do?" the one asked.

"Follow blindly the counsels I give you, and obey without hesitation or comment the orders I send you."

"We will," they exclaimed; "you alone, Don Benito, can guide us safely and ensure our victory."

There was a moment's silence. The man who had just been addressed as Don Benito went to a corner of the room hidden behind a curtain of green serge. This curtain he drew back, and behind it was an alabaster statue of the Virgin, with a lamp burning in front.

"On your knees, and take off your hats," he said.

They obeyed.

"Now," he continued, "swear to keep faithfully the promise you have just made me; swear to be merciful to the conquered in battle, and gentle to the prisoners after victory. At this price I pledge myself to support you; if not, I retire immediately from a cause which is at least dishonoured, if not lost."

The three men, after piously crossing themselves, stretched out their right arms towards the statue, saying in a firm voice—

"We swear it, by the share we hope in paradise."

"It is well," Don Benito replied, as he drew the curtain again; "I know you are too good caballeros to break so solemn an oath."

The colonel, confounded by this singular scene, which he did not at all comprehend, knew not what to do, when he fancied he heard an indistinct sound not far from him. Drawing back, he concealed himself behind the hedge, rather uneasy as to the cause of this noise, which was rapidly approaching. Almost immediately he noticed several men coming gently up; they were four in number, as he soon made out, and carrying a fifth in their arms. They walked to the door, at which they tapped in a peculiar way.

"Who's there?" was asked from inside.

One of the new comers replied, but in so low a tone, that it was impossible for the colonel to hear the word pronounced. The door was opened, and the strangers entered.

"What does this mean?" the colonel muttered.

"It means," a rough voice said in his ear, "that you are listening to what does not concern you, Colonel Melendez, and that it may prove dangerous to you."

The colonel, astounded at this unexpected answer, and especially at being so well known, quickly drew a pistol from his belt, and turned to his strange speaker.

"On my word," he answered, "there is no worse danger to incur than that of an immediate death."

The stranger laughed, and emerged from the thicket in which he was hidden. He was a powerful-looking man, and, like the colonel, held a pistol in his hand.

"You are aware that duelling is ~~forbidden~~ in the Mexican army," he said, "so

take my advice, sir, and put up that pistol, which, if it exploded, might entail very disagreeable consequences for you."

"Lower your weapon first," the colonel said, coldly.

"Very good," the other remarked, still smiling, as he thrust his pistol into his belt. The colonel imitated him.

"And now," the stranger continued, "I have to converse with you; but, as you can see, this spot is badly chosen for a secret interview."

"That is true," the colonel interrupted, frankly assuming the tone of the singular stranger.

"I am so delighted that you are of my opinion. Well, colonel, as it is so, be kind enough to accompany me merely a few paces, and I will lead you to a spot which is perfectly adapted for conversation."

"I am at your orders, caballero," the colonel answered, with a bow.

"Come, then," the stranger added, as he made a start.

The colonel followed him. The stranger led him to the spot where he had tied up his horse, by the side of which another was now standing. The stranger stopped.

"Let us mount," he said.

"What for?" the young officer asked.

"To be off, of course. Are you not returning to Galveston?"

"Certainly; still——"

"You would have had no objection to prowl a little longer round the rancho?"

"I confess it."

"Well, on my honour, you are wrong, for two excellent reasons: the first is, that you will learn nothing more than you have, which is, that the rancho is the headquarters of the insurrection. You see that I am frank."

"I perceive it. And now, what is your second reason?"

"It is very simple: you run the risk, at any moment, of being saluted with a bullet."

"Certainly; but you know also that this reason possesses but slight value for me."

"I beg your pardon; courage does not consist, in my opinion, at least, in sacrificing one's life without reason; it consists, on the contrary, in being only killed for a motive worth the trouble."

"Thanks for the lecture, caballero."

"Shall we be off?"

"At once, if you will tell me who you are?"

"I am surprised that you did not recognise me long ago, for we have been for some time past on excellent, if not intimate terms."

"That may be; the sound of your voice is rather familiar to me, and I fancy I have heard it before."

"By Heaven, colonel! you will allow me to remark that you have a preciously short memory. But since our last meeting, so many events have occurred, that it is not surprising you should have forgotten me. I am John Davis, the ex-slave-dealer."

"You!" the colonel exclaimed, with a start of surprise.

"Yes, I am that person."

"Ah! ah!" the colonel continued; "in that case we have an account to settle."

"I am not aware of the fact, colonel."

"You forget, Master Davis, in what manner you abused my confidence in order to betray me."

"I? you are in error, colonel. To do that I must have been a Mexican, which I am not, thank Heaven! I served my country as you serve yours, that is all."

"That may suit you, Master Davis, I grant; but I only know of one way of acting honourably."

"Hum! there would be a good deal to say on that point, but it is not the question. The proof that you are mistaken is, that a few minutes ago I held your life in my hands, and was unwilling to take it."

"You were wrong, for I swear to you that unless you defend yourself I shall take yours," he said.

"You are mad," said Davis, with a shrug of his shoulders; "what strange idea is this of yours to insist on killing me?"

"Will you defend yourself; yes or no?"

"Wait a moment. What a man you are! there is no way of having an explanation with you."

"One word, then, but be brief."

"Well, as you are aware, I am not accustomed to make long speeches."

"I am listening to you."

"Why play with the butt of your pistol so? vengeance is only real when complete. A shot fired would be the signal for your death, for you would be surrounded and attacked on all sides at once before you had even time to place a foot in the stirrup. You allow this, I suppose?"

"To the point, Master Davis, for I am in a hurry."

"You admit," the other said, "that I am seeking no unworthy subterfuge to avoid a meeting."

"I know that you are a brave man."

"Thanks! I do not discuss the validity of the reason which makes you wish to exchange bullets with me; a pretext is nothing to men like ourselves. I pledge my word to be at your disposal on any day, and at any hour you please, with or without witnesses."

"Would it not be better to mount, gallop into the plain that stretches out before us, and settle the affair at once?"

"I should like to do so, but, unfortunately, I must, for the present, deprive myself of the pleasure. I repeat to you that we cannot fight, at least, not at this moment."

"But the reason?" the young man exclaimed.

"The reason is this, as you absolutely insist on my telling it you: I am at this moment entrusted with very great interests; in a word, I am charged by the chief of the Texan army with a mission to General Rubio, military governor of Galveston. You are too much of a gentleman not to understand that this prohibits me risking a life which does not belong to me."

The colonel bowed with exquisite politeness and uncocked the pistol, which he restored to his belt.

"You will excuse me, *senor*," he said, "for having allowed my passion to carry me away thus; I recognise how delicate your conduct has been under the circumstances. May I venture to hope you will pardon me?"

"Not another word about the past, colonel. So soon as I have terminated my mission, I shall have the honour of placing myself at your orders. We will now proceed together to Galveston."

"I accept gladly the offer you make me. There is a truce between us: be good enough till further orders to consider and treat me as one of your friends."

"That is settled; I was certain we should end by understanding each other. To horse, then."

"I ask nothing better; still, I would observe that the night is as yet only half spent."

"Which means?"

"That till sunrise, it will be impossible for us to find a boat in which to cross to the island."

"That need not trouble you, colonel; I have a boat waiting for me, in which I shall be delighted to offer you a place."

"Hum! all the measures of you revolutionary gentlemen seem to be well taken; you want for nothing."

"The reason is very simple; would you like to know it?"

"I confess that I am curious in the matter."

"It is because, up to the present, we have appealed to the hearts, rather than the purses of our friends. The hatred of the Mexican government renders every intelligent man a devoted partizan; the hope of liberty gives us all we want; that is our whole secret. Insurrection is only organised opposition."

"That is true," said the colonel, with a laugh.

The two men, temporarily friends, mounted and set out.

"You have very singular ideas and opinions," the colonel continued.

"Oh dear no!" John Davis replied, carelessly; "those ideas and opinions are nothing but the fruit of lengthened experience. Now, suppose that the Mexicans are expelled the country, and the government of Texas is established regularly—"

"Well," the colonel said, "what will happen then?"

"This will inevitably happen," the American answered imperturbably. "A hot-headed or ambitious man will emerge from the crowd and rebel against the government. He will immediately have partisans, who will make a flag of truce, and the same men who to-day are ready to shed their blood for us with the most utter abnegation, will act in the same way for him; not because they have to complain of the government they desire to overthrow, but merely on account of that spirit of opposition to which I have alluded."

"Come, that is too strong," the colonel exclaimed.

"You do not believe me? Well, listen to this: I who am speaking to you once knew, no matter where, a man whose whole life was spent in conspiring. One day luck smiled on him, and chance enabled him, hardly knowing how or why, to occupy the highest post in the Republic. Do you know what he did?"

"Canarius! he tried to hold his ground, of course,"

"You are quite out. On the contrary, he went on conspiring, and so famously, that he overthrew himself, and was condemned to perpetual imprisonment."

"So that—?"

"So that, if the man who succeeded had not amnestied him, he would have died in prison."

The two men were still laughing at John's last repartee, when the latter stopped, and made the colonel a sign to follow his example.

"Have we arrived?" he asked.

"All but. Do you see that boat tossing about?"

"Of course I see it."

"Well, it is the one which will convey us to Galveston."

"But our horses?"

"Don't be uneasy; the owner of that wretched rancho will take all proper care of them."

John Davis raised a whistle to his lips and blew it twice sharply. Almost immediately the door of the rancho opened and a man appeared; but, after taking one step forward, he took two backward, doubtless astonished at seeing two persons when he only expected one.

"Halloh! halloh, John!" Davis shouted, "don't go."

"Is it you, then?" he asked.

"Yes! unless it be the demon who has assumed my face."

The fisherman shook his head with a dissatisfied air.

"Do not jest so, John Davis," he said; "the night is black and the sea rough; so the demon is about."

"Come, come, old porpoise," the American replied, "get your boat ready, for we

have no time to lose. This senor is a friend. Have you any alfalfa for our horses?"

"I should think so. Eh, Pedriello, come hither, muchacho. Take the horses from the caballero, and lead them to the carrol."

At this summons a tall young fellow came yawning from the rancho, and walked up to the two travellers. The latter had already dismounted; the peon took the horses by the bridle and went off with them, not saying a word.

"Shall we go?" John Davis asked.

"Whenever you please," the fisherman growled.

"I hope you have men enough?"

"My two sons and I are, I should think, enough to cross the bay."

The two men followed him, and found that he had not deceived them. The sea was bad, being rough and lumpy, and it required all the old sailor's skill to successfully cross the bay. Still, after two hours of incessant toil, the boat came alongside Gaiveston jetty, and disembarked its passengers safe and sound.

"We part here," said John Davis to the colonel; "for we each follow a different road. To-morrow morning, at nine o'clock, I shall have the honour of presenting myself at the general's house. May I hope that you have spoken to him of me in favourable terms?"

"I will do all that depends on myself."

"Thank you, and good night."

"One word, if you please, before parting."

"Speak, colonel."

"I confess to you, that at this moment I am suffering from extreme curiosity."

"What about?"

"A moment before your arrival I saw four men, carrying a fifth, enter the rancho to which accident had brought me."

"Well?"

"Who is that man?"

"I know no more about him than you do. All I can tell you is, that he was picked up dying on the beach, at eleven o'clock at night, by some of our men stationed as videttes to watch the bay. Now, who he is, or where he comes from, I do not know at all. He is covered with wounds; when picked up, he held an axe still clutched in his hand, which makes me suppose that he belonged to the crew of the *Libertad* corvette."

"One word more. Who is the man I saw at the rancho, and whom the others gave the name of Don Benito?"

"As for that man, you will soon learn to know him. He is the supreme chief of the Texan revolution; but I am not permitted to tell you more. Good-bye; we meet again at the general's."

The two men, after bowing courteously, separated, and entered the town from opposite sides; the colonel proceeding to his house, and John Davis to crave hospitality from one of the numerous conspirators.

CHAPTER II.

A BARGAIN.

THE most minute precautions had been taken by the Jaguar and El Alferes to keep their double expedition a secret, and hide their success until they had found time

to make certain arrangements. The means of communication were at that period extremely difficult. Only one man, Colonel Melendez, was at all cognisant of what had happened, and we have seen that it was impossible for him to have said anything. And yet, scarce two hours after the events we have described were accomplished, a vague rumour already ran about the town.

This rumour, like a rising tide, swelled from instant to instant, and assumed gigantic proportions; for, as always happens under similar circumstances, the truth disappeared almost entirely to make way for a monstrous collection of reports, each more absurd than the other.

Among other things, it was stated that the insurgents were advancing on the town with a formidable fleet of twenty-five ships, having on board ten thousand troops. Nothing less was spoken of than the immediate bombardment of Galveston by the insurgents, large parties of whom, it was stated, were scouring the country to intercept all communication between the town and the mainland.

Terror never reasons. In spite of the material impossibility of the insurgents being able to collect so considerable a fleet and army, few doubted the truth of the rumour, and the townspeople, with their eyes anxiously fixed on the sea, fancied in each gull whose wings flashed on the horizon, they saw the vanguard of the Texan fleet.

General Rubio was himself alarmed. If he did not place entire faith on these rumours, a secret foreboding warned him that grave events were preparing, and would soon burst like a thunder-cloud over the town. The colonel's prolonged absence added still further to his anxiety. Still the situation was too critical for the general not to try to escape from it by any means.

Unfortunately, through its position and commerce, Galveston is a thoroughly American town, and the Mexican element was found there in but very limited proportions. The general was perfectly aware that the North Americans who represented the mercantile class sympathised with the revolution and only waited for a favourable opportunity to raise the mask and declare themselves. The Mexican population itself was not at all desirous of running the risk of a siege; it preferred to a contest, which is ever injurious to commercial interests, an arrangement, no matter of what nature. Money has no country, and hence the population of Galveston cared very little whether it was Texan or Mexican, provided that it was not ruined.

In the midst of all this egotism and vexation, the general felt the more embarrassed, because he possessed but a very weak force, incapable of keeping the population in check, if they revolted. After vainly awaiting the colonel's return till eleven o'clock, the general resolved to summon to his house the most influential merchants of the town, in order to consult with them on the means to protect individuals, and place the town in a posture of defence, were that possible.

The merchants responded to the general's summons with an eagerness which, to any man less thoroughly acquainted with the American character, would have seemed a good omen. At about half-an-hour after midnight, the general's saloon was crowded; some thirty merchants, the élite of Galveston, were collected there.

His Excellency, Don José Maria Rubio, was essentially a man of action, frank, loyal, and convinced that in all cases the best way of dealing is to go straight to the point. After the first compliments, he began speaking, and claimed the assistance of the inhabitants of the town to ward off the dangers that threatened it, promising, if that help were assured him, to hold out against the whole revolutionary army.

The merchants were far from expecting such a request. For some minutes they knew not what answer to give; but at last, after consulting in whispers, the oldest and most influential of them undertook to reply in the names of all, and began speaking with that feigned frankness which conceals so much duplicity.

This merchant, a native of Tennessee, had in his youth carried on nearly all those

trades more or less acknowledgable, by means of which men in the new world contrive in so short a time to raise a large fortune. Coming to Texas as a slave-dealer, he had gradually extended his trade; then he became a speculator, corn-dealer—anything. In a word, he worked so well, that in less than ten years he was in possession of millions. Morally, he was an old fox, without faith or law; a Greek by instinct, and a Jew by temperament. His name was Lionel Fisher; he was short and stout, and appeared scarce sixty years of age.

"Senor General," he said in an obsequious voice, after bowing with that haughty humility which distinguishes parvenus, "we are extremely pained by the sad news your excellency has thought it right to communicate to us, for none are more affected than ourselves by the calamities of our hapless country. We deplore in our hearts the situation into which Texas is suddenly cast, for we shall be the first assailed in our fortunes and affections. We should be glad to make the greatest sacrifices in order to prevent disasters. But, alas! what can we do?—nothing. In spite of our good will and warm desire to prove to your excellency that you possess all our sympathies, our hands are tied. Our assistance, far from helping the Mexican government, would, on the contrary, injure it, because the populace and vagabonds who flock to all sea-ports, and who are in a majority at Galveston, delighted at having found a pretext for disorder, would immediately revolt, apparently to defend the insurrection, but in reality to plunder us. This consideration compels us most reluctantly to remain neutral."

"Reflect, senores," the general answered, "that the sacrifice I ask of you is but a trifle. Each of you will give me a thousand piastres; it is not too much, I suppose, to guarantee the security of your money and goods? for with the sum you collect, I pledge myself to preserve you from all harm."

At this point-blank appeal the merchants made a grimace, which the general did not appear to notice.

"The offering I claim from you at such a moment," he continued, "is not exorbitant; is it not just that in the hour of need you should come to the aid of a government under whose protection you have grown rich, and which has, up to this day, demanded nothing from you?"

Caught in this dilemma, the merchants did not know what to answer. They were not all desirous to give their money in the defence of a cause which their secret efforts tended on the contrary to destroy, but when thus pressed by the general, their embarrassment was extreme; they did not dare openly to refuse, and wished still less to say yes.

The great American bankruptcies which a few years back terrified the Old World by their cynical effrontery, edified us as to the commercial honesty of this country, which in its dealings never says yes, and is so afraid of letting its thoughts be penetrated, that even in the most frivolous conversations the people, through fear of compromising themselves by an affirmative, say at each sentence, "I suppose," "I believe," "I think."

General Rubio, who had been a long time in Texas, and accustomed to daily dealings with the Americans, was perfectly well aware in what way he should treat them, hence he was not at all disturbed by their embarrassed denials, their protestations of devotion, or their downcast faces. After leaving them a few moments for reflection, seeing that they could not make up their minds to answer him, he continued in his calmest voice and with his most pleasant air—

"I see, senores, that the reasons I have had the honour of laying before you have not had the good fortune to convince you, and I am really vexed at it. Now, I venture to believe that you will do me the justice of saying that you have always found me kind and complaisant toward you."

The merchants naturally burst into affirmations as the general continued.

"Unfortunately it can no longer be so. In the face of this obstinate and unpatriotic refusal you so peremptorily give me, I am, to my great regret, constrained to carry out literally the orders I have received."

At this declaration, the merchants began shivering; they understood that the general was about to take a brilliant revenge, although they did not know yet what was about to happen. For all that, they began to repent having accepted the invitation. The general kept smiling, but the smile had something bitter and mocking in its expression, which was far from reassuring them. At this moment a clock struck two.

"Caramba," said the general, "is it so late? How quickly time passes in your agreeable company! Senores, we must wind up the business. I should be in despair if I kept you longer from your homes."

"In truth," stammered the merchant who had hitherto spoken, "whatever pleasure we feel——"

"You would feel greater still at being elsewhere," the general interrupted, with a laugh; "I perfectly understand that, Don Lionel, hence I will not abuse your patience much longer. I only ask you for a few minutes more, so be kind enough to sit down again."

The merchants obeyed, while exchanging a glance of despair. The general seemed to be deaf and blind, for he saw and heard nothing. He struck a bell; at the summons a door opened, and an officer walked in.

"Captain Saldana," the general asked, "is all ready?"

"Yes, general," the captain answered, with a respectful bow.

"Senores," the governor continued, "I have received from the Mexican government orders to lay on the rich merchants of this town a war-tax of sixty thousand piastres in cash. Here is the order," he added, as he took a paper from the table and unfolded it, "it is peremptory; still, I am ready to grant you five minutes to make up your minds; but when that period has elapsed, I shall be compelled to do my duty, and you are sufficiently well acquainted with me to know that I shall do it at all hazards."

"But, general," the old merchant said, "you will permit me to observe, that the sum is enormous."

"Nonsense, senores! there are thirty of you—it only amounts to two thousand piastres per head, which is only a trifle to you. I made you an offer to knock off half."

"Business has been flat for years, and money is scarce."

"To whom do you say that, Don Lionel? I fancy I am better aware of that fact than anybody else."

"Perhaps if you were to grant us a delay of a month or a fortnight, we might manage to scrape together one-half the amount."

"Unfortunately, I cannot even grant you an hour."

"In that case, general, it is impossible."

"Nonsense! I feel certain that you have not reflected. Besides, that is no affair of mine; in asking you for this money, I carry out the orders I have received, it is for you to judge whether you will consent or not."

"Really, general," the old merchant continued, "really, it is impossible for us to pay the smallest amount."

All bowed in affirmation.

"Very good," the general continued, "that is clearly understood, then. Still, you will not, I trust, render me responsible for the consequences which this refusal may entail."

"Oh, general, you cannot suppose that!"

"Thanks. You heard, captain?" he added, turning to the officer, who was standing motionless by the door; "order in the detachment."

"Yes, general."

And the officer quitted the room. The merchants gave a start of terror, for this mysterious order caused them to reflect seriously, and their anxiety became the greater, when they heard the clang of arms in the patio, and the heavy foot-falls of approaching troops.

"What is the meaning of this, general?" they cried in terror; "can we have fallen into a trap?"

"What do you mean?" the general said. "Oh, I beg your pardon, but I forgot to communicate to you the end of this order, which concerns you particularly; however, that will be soon done. I am instructed to have all persons shot who refuse to subscribe to the loan demanded by the government."

At the same instant the doors were thrown wide open, and a detachment of fifty men silently surrounded the merchants. The latter were more dead than alive. Certain that the general would not hesitate to execute the threat he had made them, the merchants did not know how to get out of the scrape.

"Come, senors," said the governor, "pray accept my heartfelt sympathy. Captain, lead these gentlemen away."

He then bowed, and prepared to leave the room.

"One moment," the old merchant said, quite appalled by the approach of death; "are there no means of settling this business, general?"

"I only know of one—paying."

"I am well aware of that," he said with a sigh; "but, alas! we are ruined."

"What can I do?"

"Alas," the poor merchants exclaimed in chorus, "you will not kill us, surely, general; we are fathers of families; what will become of our wives and children?"

"I pity you, but can do no more than that."

"General," they cried, falling at his knees, "in the name of what you hold dearest, have pity on us."

"I am really in despair at what has occurred, and should like to come to your aid; unhappily I do not see my way."

"Alas!" they cried, sobbing and clasping their hands.

"I am well aware that you have not the money, and there is the insurmountable difficulty, believe me. However, let us see," he added, apparently reflecting.

The poor devils, who felt themselves so near death, looked at him with eyes sparkling with hope. There was a rather lengthened silence, during which you might have heard the heart-throbs of these men, who knew that life and death depended on the man who held them panting under his eye.

"Listen," he continued, "this is all I can do for you, and believe me, that, in acting thus, I assume an enormous responsibility; there are thirty of you, I think?"

"Yes, excellency," they exclaimed, unanimously.

"Well, only ten of you shall be shot. You shall select them yourselves, and those you designate will be immediately led into the patio and executed. But now ask me for nothing further, as I shall be constrained to refuse you."

This was a proof of incontestable cleverness on the part of the general. By breaking, through his decision, the agreement that had hitherto prevailed among the merchants, by opposing them to one another, he was certain of obtaining the result which, without, he would probably not have secured.

Whatever General Rubio's intentions might have been, however, the Americans believed him, and acted accordingly. After two or three minutes' hesitation, the merchants came one after the other, to give their consent to the loan. But their tergiversation had cost them a thousand dollars a-piece. It was dear, hence we must allow that they consented with very ill grace.

Still, the general did not let them off cheaply. The Americans were led home one

after the other by four soldiers and an officer, whose instructions were to shoot the prisoner at the slightest attempted escape, and it was not till the general had the two thousand piastres in his hands that a second prisoner was sent home in the same fashion. This went on until the whole sum was collected.

"Oh, excellency!" said old Lionel, reproachfully, "how is it possible that you, who have hitherto been so kind, could have had the thought of committing such an act of cruelty?"

The general burst out laughing.

"Do you imagine I would have done it?" he said.

The merchant struck his forehead with a gesture of despair.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "we were idiots."

"I'ang it, did you have such a bad opinion of me? Caramba, senior, I do not commit such acts as that."

"Ah," the merchant said, with a laugh, "I have not paid yet."

"Which means?"

"That now I know what I have to expect. I shall not pay."

"Really, I believed you cleverer than that."

"Why so?"

"What? do you not understand that a man may hesitate to execute thirty persons, but when it comes to only one man, who, like yourself, has a great number of misdeeds on his conscience, his execution is considered an act of justice, and carried out without hesitation."

"Then, you would shoot me?"

"Without the slightest remorse."

"Come, come, general, you are decidedly stronger than I am."

"You flatter me, Senior Lionel!"

"No," he answered, with a modest smile. "To spare you the trouble of having me executed, I will execute myself," he added, as he felt his coat pocket.

He drew out a pocket-book crammed with Bank of England notes, and made up the sum of two thousand piastres, which he laid on the table.

"I have now only to thank you," the general said, as he picked up the notes.

"And I you, excellency," he answered.

"Why so?"

"You have given me a lesson by which I shall profit when the occasion offers."

"Take care, Senior Lionel," the general said, meaningly; "you will not, perhaps, come across a man so good-natured as myself."

The merchant restored the portfolio to his pocket, bowed to the general, and went out. It was three o'clock; all had been finished in less than an hour.

"Poor scamps, after all, those gringos," the general said, when he was alone.

"General," said an aide-de-camp, opening the door, "Colonel Melendez asks whether you will deign to receive him, in spite of the late hour?"

"Is Colonel Melendez here?" the general asked.

"He has this instant arrived, general."

"Show him in at once."

In a few minutes the colonel appeared.

"Here you are at last," the general cried; "I fancied you were either dead or a prisoner."

"It was a toss up that one of the two events did not happen."

"Oh, oh! then you have something serious to tell me?"

"Most serious, general."

"Ha! it! my friend, take a chair and let us talk."

"Before all, general," the colonel remarked, "do you know our position?"

"What do you mean?"

"Only, general, that you may possibly be ignorant of certain events that have happened."

"I think I have heard grave events rumoured, though I do not exactly know what has happened."

"Listen, then! the *Libertad* corvette is in the hands of the insurgents."

"Impossible!" the general exclaimed.

"General," the young officer said, in a mournful voice, "I have to inform you of something more serious still."

"Pardon me, my friend, perhaps I am mistaken, but it seems to me highly improbable that you could have obtained such positive news during the pleasure trip you have been making."

"Not only, general, have the insurgents seized the *Libertad*, but they have also made themselves masters of the Fort of the Point."

"Oh!" the general shouted, "this time, colonel, you are badly informed; the fort is impregnable."

"It was taken in an hour by thirty freebooters, commanded by the Jaguar."

The general hid his face in his hands, with an expression of despair impossible to render.

"Oh! it is too much at once," he exclaimed.

"That is not all," the colonel continued, sharply.

"What have you to tell me more terrible than what you have just said?"

"A thing that will make you leap with rage and blush with shame, general."

The old soldier laid his hand on his heart, as if wishful to arrest its hurried beating.

"Speak, my friend; I am ready to hear all."

The colonel remained silent for some minutes; the despair of the brave old soldier made him shiver.

"General," he said, "perhaps it would be better to defer till to-morrow what I have to say to you; you appear fatigued, and a few hours, more or less, are not of much consequence."

"Colonel Melendez," the general said, giving the young officer a searching glance, "under present circumstances a minute is worth an age."

"The insurgents request a parley," the colonel said, distinctly.

"To parley with me?" the general answered, with bitter irony in his voice.

"These caballeros do me a great honour. And what about, pray?"

"As they think themselves capable of seizing Galveston, they wish to avoid bloodshed by treating with you."

The general rose, and walked sharply up and down the room for some minutes.

"And what would you do in my place?"

"I should treat," the young officer replied, unhesitatingly.

CHAPTER III.

THE RETREAT.

AFTER this frankly-expressed opinion there was a rather lengthened silence.

"General," the colonel presently resumed, "you evidently know nothing of the events that have occurred during the last four and twenty hours."

"How could I know anything?" out of twenty spies I have sent out, not one has returned."

"And not one will return, be assured."

"What is to be done, then?"

"Do you really wish for my advice, general?"

"On my honour, I do; for you are the only one among us, I fancy, who really knows what is going on."

"I am aware of it. Listen to me, then, and do not feel astonished at anything you may hear, for all is positively true. The information I am about to have the honour of communicating to you was given me by the Jaguar himself, scarce three hours back, at the Salto del Frayle."

"Very good," the general remarked. "Go on, I am listening to you with the deepest attention."

The colonel felt himself blush under his chief's slightly ironical smile; still he recovered himself, and continued—

"In two words, this is our position: while a few bold men, aided by a privateer brig under the American flag, carried by surprise the *Libertad*——"

"The finest ship in our navy!"

"Yes, general, but unhappily it is now an accomplished fact. While this was taking place, other insurgents, commanded by the Jaguar in person, got into the Fort of the Point, and carried it almost without a blow."

"But what you tell me is impossible!" the old soldier interrupted with a burst of passion.

"I tell you nothing that is not rigorously true, general."

"The vague rumours that have reached me led me to suppose that the insurgents had dealt us a fresh blow; but I was far from suspecting such a catastrophe."

"I swear to you, on my honour as a soldier, general, that I only tell you the most rigid truth."

"I believe you, my friend, for I know how brave and worthy of confidence you are. Still, the news you give me is so frightful, that, in spite of myself, I should like to be able to doubt it."

The general, suffering from a fury which was the more terrible as it was concentrated, walked up and down the room, clenching his fists, and muttering broken sentences. At the end of some minutes the general succeeded so far in mastering his emotion as to drive back to his heart the annoyance he felt. He sat down again by the colonel's side, and took his hand kindly.

"You have not yet given me your advice," he said.

"If you really insist on my speaking, I will do so, general," the young man answered, "though I am convinced beforehand that our ideas are absolutely similar."

"That is probable. Still, my dear colonel, the opinion of a man of your merits is always precious."

"Be it so, general. This is what I think: we have but insufficient forces to sustain an assault effectively. The town is very badly disposed toward us: I am convinced that it only wants an opportunity to rise and make common cause with the insurgents. On the other hand, it would be a signal act of folly to shut ourselves up in a town where we should be forced to surrender—an indelible stain for the Mexican army. For the present, we have no succour to expect from the government of Mexico."

"What you say is unfortunately only too true; we are reduced to reckon on ourselves alone."

"Now, if we obstinately shut ourselves up in the town, it is evident to me that we shall be compelled eventually to surrender. On the other hand, if we quit it of our free will, the position will be singularly simplified."

"But, in that case, we shall be compelled to treat with these scoundrels?"

"I thought so for an instant; but I believe we can easily avoid that misfortune."

"In what way? speak, speak, my friend."

The flag of truce the insurgents send you will not arrive at the cabildo till nine in the morning; what prevents you, general, evacuating the town to-night?"

"Hum!" said the general, growing more and more attentive to the young man's remarks. "Then you propose flight to me?"

"Not at all," the colonel retorted; "remember, general, that the position is admitted, that in war recoiling is not flying. In the open plains, and through our discipline, we shall be enabled to hold our own against a force four times our strength, which would not be possible here; then, when we have obtained those reinforcements Santa Anna will probably himself bring us ere long, we will re-enter Galveston."

"Yes," the general answered, "the advice you offer would have some chance of success, were it possible to follow it. Unluckily, it would be madness to reckon on Santa Anna's support: he would allow us to be crushed, not perhaps of his own will, but compelled by circumstances, and impeded by the constant obstacles the senate creates for him."

"I cannot share your opinion on that point, general; be well assured that the senate, ill-disposed though it may be to the president, is no more desirous to lose Texas than he is. Besides, under the present circumstances, we must make a virtue of necessity."

The general seemed to hesitate for some minutes, then he rang a bell. An aide-de-camp appeared.

"Let all the general officers assemble here within half-an-hour," he said. "Begone."

The aide-de-camp bowed, and left the room.

"You wish it," the general continued, turning to the colonel; "well, be it so. I consent to follow your advice."

The general had rapidly seen the value of the colonel's idea. The plan the latter proposed was, in truth, the only practicable one, and hence he accepted it at once.

General Rubio feared lest the merchants of Galveston, whom he had so cleverly compelled to disgorge, might try to take their revenge by exciting the people to mutiny against the Mexicans, and they would probably be ready enough to do so, delighted at finding a pretext for disorder, without troubling themselves further as to the more or less grave results of their mutiny. Hence, while his aide-de-camp performed the commission he had entrusted to him, General Rubio ordered Colonel Melendez to take with him all the soldiers on duty at the cabildo, place himself at their head, and seize the requisite number of boats for the transport of the troops to the mainland.

This order was not difficult to execute. The colonel, without losing a moment, went to the port, and not experiencing the slightest opposition from the captains and masters of the vessels, who were well aware, besides, that a refusal would not be listened to, assembled a flotilla of fifteen light vessels, amply sufficient for the transport of the garrison. In the meanwhile, the aide-de-camp had performed his duties with intelligence and celerity, so that within twenty minutes all the Mexican officers were collected at the general's house.

The latter, without losing a moment, explained to them in a voice that admitted of no reply, the position in which the capture of the fort placed the garrison, the necessity of not letting the communication with the mainland be cut off, and his intention of evacuating the town with the least possible delay. The officers, as the general expected, were unanimous in applauding his resolution, for in their hearts they were not at all anxious to sustain a siege in which only hard blows could be received.

Orders were immediately given by the general to march the troops down to the quay with arms and baggage; still, in order to avoid any cause for disorder, the movement was executed very slowly, and the colonel, who presided over the embarkation, was careful to establish numerous posts at the entrance of each street leading to the port, so that the populace were kept away from the soldiers, and no disputes were possible between them. So soon as one boat had its complement of troops on board it pushed off, though it did not start, as the general wished the entire flotilla to leave the town together.

It was a magnificent morning; the sun dazzled, and the bay sparkled like a burning-glass. The people, kept at a distance by the bayonets of the soldiers, watched in gloomy silence the embarkation of the troops. Alarmed by this movement, which they did not at all understand, and were so far from suspecting the departure of the Mexican garrison, that they supposed, on the contrary, that the general was proceeding with a portion of his troops to make an expedition against the insurgents.

When all the soldiers, with the exception of those intended to protect the retreat of their comrades, had embarked, the general sent for the alcade mayor, the juez de letras, and the corregidor. These magistrates came to the general, concealing, but poorly, under a feigned eagerness, the secret alarm caused them by the order they had just received. In spite of the rapidity with which the troops effected their embarkation, it was by this time nearly nine o'clock. At the moment when the general was preparing to address the magistrates whom he had so unexpectedly convened, Colonel Melendez entered the cabildo, and said—

"General, the person to whom I had the honour of referring last night is awaiting your good pleasure."

"Ah! ah!" the general replied, "is he there?"

"Yes, general; I have promised to act as his introducer to your excellency."

"Very good. Request the person to enter."

"What!" the colonel exclaimed, in surprise, "does your excellency intend to confer with him in the presence of witnesses?"

"Certainly, and I regret there are not more here. Bring in the person, colonel."

"Has your excellency carefully reflected on the order you have done me the honour to give me?"

"Hang it! I should think so. I am sure you will be satisfied with what I am about to do."

"As you insist, general, I can only obey."

"Yes, yes, my friend, obey; do not be uneasy, I tell you."

The colonel withdrew without any further remark, and in a few moments returned, bringing John Davis with him. The American had changed his dress for one more appropriate to the circumstances. His demeanour was grave, and step haughty, though not arrogant. On entering the room he bowed to the general courteously, and prepared to address him.

"Pardon me, sir," said General Rubio, "be kind enough to excuse me for a few moments. Perhaps, after listening to what I shall have the honour of saying to these caballeros, you will consider your mission as finished."

The American made no further reply than a bow.

"Senores," the general then said, addressing the magistrates, "orders I have this moment received compel me to leave the town at once with the troops I have the honour to command. During my absence I entrust the direction of affairs to you, feeling convinced that you will act in all things prudently and for the common welfare."

"Then, general," the alcade said, "that is the motive of the movement of the troops we have witnessed this morning. Do you really intend to depart?"

"You have heard me, *senor*."

"Yes, I have heard you, general; but in my turn, in my capacity as magistrate, I will ask you by what right you, the military governor of the state, leave one of its principal ports to its own resources in the present critical state of affairs, when the revolution is before our gates, and make not the slightest attempt to defend us? That is what I have to say to you in my name and in that of my colleagues. Now, in your turn, you will act as you think proper, but you are warned that you can in no way reckon upon us."

"Ah, ah, *senores*!" the general exclaimed, with an angry frown, "is that the way you venture to act? Take care, I have not gone yet; I am still master of Galveston, and can institute a severe example."

"Do so, general, we will undergo without a murmur any punishment you may please to inflict on us."

"Very good," the general replied, in a voice quivering with passion; "as it is so, I leave you free to act, according to circumstances. But you will have a severe account to render to me, and that perhaps shortly."

"Not we, excellency, for your departure will be the signal of our resignation."

"Then you have made up your mind to plunge the country into anarchy?"

"What can we do? What means have we to prevent it?"

General Rubio in his heart felt the logic of this reasoning; he saw perfectly well how egotistic and cruel his conduct was towards the townsmen, whom he thus surrendered, without any means of defence, to the fury of the popular passion. Unfortunately, the position was no longer tenable—the town could not be defended, hence he must depart, without answering the decade; for what reply could he have made him?

"Pardon me for detaining you for a moment, general," John Davis said; "but I should have liked to have a short conversation with your excellency."

"For what good object, sir?" the general answered; "did you not hear what was said? Return to those who sent you, and report to them what you have seen."

"Still, general," he urged, "I should have desired——"

"What?" the general interrupted, and then added, ironically, "To make me proposals, I presume, on the part of the insurgents. Know, sir, that whatever may happen, I will never consent to treat with rebels. Thank Colonel M'Jendrez, who was kind enough to introduce you to my presence. Had it not been for his intervention I should have had you hung as a traitor to your country. Begone!—or stay!" he added. "Seize this man!"

"General, take care," the American replied. "I am intrusted with a mission; arresting me is a violation of the law of nations."

"Nonsense, sir," the general continued, "why, you must be mad. Do I recognise the right of the persons from whom you come to send me a flag of truce? Do I know who you are? Viva Dios! in what age are we living, then, that rebels dare to treat on equal terms with the government against which they have revolted? You are my prisoner, sir! Be at your ease; I have no intention of ill treating you, or retaining you any length of time. You will accompany us to the mainland, that is all. When we have arrived there you will be free to go wherever you please."

"We have always rendered justice to your heart and loyalty, general."

"I care very little for the opinion you and yours have of me. Come on, sir."

"I protest, general, against this illegal arrest."

"Protest as much as you please, sir, but follow me."

"Well," Davis said, with a laugh, "I follow you, general. After all, I have not much cause to complain."

They went out. When the general appeared, the crowd made way respectfully to let him pass, and many persons saluted him.

The inhabitants of Galveston detested the Mexican Government; but they did justice to the governor, whose honest and moderate administration had effectually protected them during the whole time he remained among them, instead of taking advantage of his authority to plunder and tyrannize over them. They saw with pleasure the departure of the troops, with sorrow that of the general. The old soldier advanced with a calm step, talking loudly with his officers, and courteously returning the bows he received, with smiling face and assured demeanour. He reached the port in a few minutes, and at his order the last soldiers embarked. The general, with no other weapon but his sword, remained for some minutes almost alone in the midst of the crowd that followed him to the quay. Two aides-de-camp alone accompanied him.

"General," one of the aides-de-camp said, "all the troops have embarked, and we are now only waiting your excellency's pleasure."

"Very good, captain," he answered. He then turned to the magistrates, who had walked by his side from the cabildo. "Farewell, senores," he said, taking off his hat, whose white plumes swept the ground, "farewell, till we meet again. I pray heaven, from my heart, that, during my short absence, you will be enabled to avoid the scenes of disorder and anarchy which the effervescence of parties too often occasions. Long live Mexico!"

"Long live Mexico!" the two officers shouted.

The crowd remained dumb; not a man took up the General's shout. He shook his head sadly, bowed for the last time, and went down into the boat waiting for him. Two minutes later the Mexican flotilla had left.

"When shall we return?" the general muttered.

"Never!" John Davis whispered in his ear; and this prophetic voice affected the old soldier to the depth of his heart, and filled it with bitterness.

CHAPTER IV.

JOHN DAVIS.

THE Mexican flotilla, impelled by a favourable breeze, accomplished the passage from the island to the mainland in a comparatively very brief period. The brig and corvette, anchored under the battery of the fort, made no move to disturb the general; and it was evident that the Texans did not suspect the events taking place at this moment, but patiently awaited the return of their envoy before making any demonstration.

Colonel Melendez had seized the few boats capable of standing out to sea in Galveston harbour, so that the magistrates could not, had they wished it, have sent a boat to the Texans. The general's resolution had been formed so suddenly, and executed with such rapidity, that the partizans of the revolution in the town felt singularly embarrassed by the liberty so singularly granted them, and did not know what arrangements to make, or how to enter into communication with their friends. Only one man could have enlightened them, and he was John Davis. But General Rubio, foreseeing what would have inevitably happened, had been very careful to carry him off with him.

The landing of the troops was effected under the most favourable conditions. The point they steered for was in the hands of the Mexicans, who had a strong detachment there, so that the army got ashore without arousing suspicion. The general's

first care, so soon as he reached the mainland, was to send off spies in every direction.

The boats which had been used to convey the troops were, till further orders, drawn up on the beach, through fear lest the insurgents might make use of them, while two schooners, on each of which two guns were put, received orders to cruise in the bay.

The banks of the Rio Trinidad are charming and deliciously diversified, bordered by rushes and reeds, and covered with mangroves, amid which sport thousands of flamingoes, cranes, herons, and wild ducks, which cackle noisily as they swim about in tranquil and transparent waters. About four miles from the sea, the banks rise gradually with insensible undulations, and form meadows covered with a tall and tufted grass, on which grow gigantic trees with red fruit, and magnolias, whose large white flowers shed an intoxicating perfume. All these trees, fastened together by lianas which envelop them in their inextricable network, serve as a retreat for a population of red and grey squirrels, that may be seen perpetually leaping from branch to branch, and of cardinal and mocking birds.

On the side of a hill that descends in a gentle slope to the river, glisten the white walls of some twenty cottages, with their flat roofs and green shutters. These few cottages, built so far from the noise of the world, constitute the rancho of San Isidro.

Unfortunately for the inhabitants of this obscure nook, General Rubio, who felt the necessity of choosing a strong strategic position, came suddenly to trouble their peace, and recall them rather roughly to the affairs of this world. In fact, from this species of eagles' nest, nothing was easier than for the general to send his columns in all directions. The Mexican army marched straight on the rancho of San Isidro, where it arrived about mid-day. At the unexpected appearance of the troops, the inhabitants left their houses and fled to hide themselves in the woods.

Whatever efforts the general might make to prevent them, or bring them back to their houses, the poor people offered a deaf ear to all, and were resolved not to remain in the vicinity of the troops. The Mexicans therefore remained sole possessors of the rancho, and at once installed themselves in their peaceful conquest, whose appearance was completely changed within a few hours. Tall trees, flowers, and lianas, nothing was respected. Enormous masses of wood lay that same evening on the ground, which they had so long protected with their beneficent shadow.

When all the approaches to the forest had been cleared for a radius of above twelve hundred yards, the general had the place surrounded by powerful barricades, which transformed the peaceful village into a fortress. The trees on the interior of the rancho were alone left standing.

The house of the Alcade, somewhat larger and more comfortably built than the rest, was selected by the general. This house stood in the centre of the pueblo; from its azotea the country could be surveyed for a great distance, and no movement in Galveston roads escaped notice.

At sunset all the preliminary preparations were finished, and the rancho rendered safe against a coup de main. About seven in the evening the general, after listening to the report of the spies, was sitting in front of the house in the shadow of a magnificent magnolia, when an aide-de-camp came up and told him that the person who had come to him that morning from the rebels earnestly requested the favour of a few minutes' conversation. The general gave an angry start, and was about to refuse, when Colonel Melendez interposed, representing to the general that he could not do so without breaking his word.

"As it is so," the general said, "let him come."

"Why," the colonel continued, "refuse to listen to the propositions this man is authorised to offer you?"

"What good is it at this moment? there is always a time to do so if circumstances compel it."

These words were uttered in a tone that compelled the colonel to silence; he bowed respectfully, and withdrew softly from the circle of officers. At the same moment John Davis arrived. The American's face was gloomy and frowning; he saluted the general by raising his hand to his hat, but did not remove it; then he drew himself up haughtily and crossed his hands on his chest.

"What do you want?" asked the general.

"The fulfilment of your promise," Davis replied.

"I do not understand you."

"What do you say? when you made me a prisoner this morning, in contempt of the military code and the laws of nations, did you not tell me that so soon as we reached the mainland, the liberty you had deprived me of would be immediately restored to me?"

"I did say so," the general answered meekly.

"Well, I demand the fulfilment of that promise; I ought to have left your camp long ago."

"Did you not tell me that you were deputed to me to submit certain propositions?"

"Yes, but you refused to hear me."

"Because the moment was not favourable. Imperious duties prevented me then giving your words all the attention that they doubtless deserve."

"Well, and now?"

"Now I am ready to listen to you."

The American looked at the officers around.

"Before all these persons?" he asked.

"Why not? These caballeros belong to the staff of my army; they are interested in this interview."

"Perhaps so: still I would observe, general, that it would be better for our discussion to be private."

"I am the sole judge of the propriety of my actions. If it please you to be silent, be so; if not, speak."

"Do you regard me as an envoy, or merely as your prisoner?"

"Why this question, whose purport I do not understand?"

"Pardon me, general," he said with an ironical smile, "but you understand me perfectly well, and so do these caballeros—if a prisoner, you have the right to force silence upon me; as a deputy, on the other hand, I enjoy certain immunities, under the protection of which I can speak frankly and clearly, and no one can bid me be silent, so long as I do not go beyond the limits of my mission."

"Your position has not changed to my knowledge. You are an envoy of rebels."

"Oh, you recognise it now?"

"I always did so."

"Why did you make me a prisoner, then?"

"You are shifting the question. I explained to you a moment ago, for what reason I was, to my great regret, compelled to defer our interview."

"Very good, I am willing to admit it. Be kind enough, general, to read this letter," he added, as he drew from his pocket a large envelope, which, at a sign from the general, he handed to him.

Night had fallen some time before, and two soldiers brought up torches of acote-wood. The general opened the letter and read it attentively by the ruddy light. When he had finished reading, he folded up the letter, and thrust it into the breast of his uniform. There was a moment's silence, which the general at last broke.

"Who is the man who gave you this letter?"

"Did you not read his signature?"

"He may have employed a go-between."

"With me, that is not necessary."

"Then he is here?"

"I have not to tell you who sent me, but merely discuss with you the proposals contained in the letter."

The general gave a passionate start.

"Reply, *senor*, to the questions I do you the honour of asking you," he said, "if you do not wish to have reasons for repenting."

"What is the use of threatening me, general? You will learn nothing from me," he answered firmly.

"As it is so, listen to me attentively, and carefully weigh your answer before opening your mouth."

"Speak, general."

"This moment,—*senor*, you will confess to me, where the man is who gave you his letter, if not—"

"Well?" the American nominally interrupted.

"Within ten minutes you will be hanging from a branch of that tree, close to you."

Davis gave him a disdainful glance.

"On my soul," he said ironically, "you Mexicans have a strange way of treating envoys."

"I do not recognise the right of a scoundrel, outlawed for his crimes, and whose head is justly forfeited, to send me envoys, and treat with me as an equal."

"The man whom you seek in vain to brand is a man of heart, as you know better than anybody else. But gratitude is as offensive to you as it is to all haughty minds, and you cannot forgive the person to whom we allude, for having saved, not only life, but also your honour."

John Davis might have gone on speaking much longer, for the general, who was as pale as a corpse, seemed incapable of uttering a syllable. Colonel Melendez had quietly approached the circle. For some minutes he had listened to the words the speakers interchanged, with gradually augmenting passion; judging it necessary, therefore, to interpose ere matters had reached such a point as rendered any hope of conciliation impossible, he said to John Davis:

"Silence! you are under the lion's claw; take care that it does not rend you."

"Under the tiger's claw you mean, Colonel Melendez," he exclaimed, with much animation. "What! shall I listen calmly to an insult offered the noblest heart, the greatest man, the most devoted and sincere patriot, and not attempt to defend him and confound his calumniator?"

"Enough," the general cried, in a loud voice, "that man is right; under the influence of painful reminiscences I uttered words that I regret. I wish them forgotten."

John Davis bowed courteously.

"General," he said, "I thank you for this retraction; I expected nothing less from your sense of honour."

The officers, astonished at this strange scene, which they did not at all understand, looked restlessly at each other, though not venturing to express their surprise otherwise. The general walked up to John Davis and stopped in front of him.

"Master Davis," he said to him, in a harsh and snapping voice, "you are a stout-hearted and rough-spoken man. Enough of this; return to the man who sent you, and tell him this: "General Don José Maria Rubio will not enter into any relations with you; he hates you personally, and only wishes to meet you sword in hand. No political question will be discussed between you and him until you have consented to give him the satisfaction he demands. Engrave these words well in your memory, *senor*."

"I will repeat them exactly."

"Very good. Now begone; we have nothing more to say to each other. Colonel Melendez, be good enough to give this caballero a horse."

"But in what way shall I bring you the answer?"

"Bring it yourself, if you are not afraid to enter my camp a second time."

"You are well aware that I fear nothing, general. I will bring you the answer Farewell."

And bowing to the company, he withdrew, accompanied by the colonel.

"You played a dangerous game," the latter said, when they had gone a few steps; "the general might very easily have had you hung."

"He would not have dared," the American said.

"Oh, oh! and why not, if you please?"

"How does that concern you, colonel; am I not free?"

"You are."

"That must be sufficient for you, and prove to you that I am not mistaken."

The colonel led the American to his quarters, and asked him to walk in, while a horse was being got ready.

"Master Davis," he said to him, "be good enough to select from those weapons, whose excellence I guarantee, such as best suit you."

"Why so?" he remarked.

"Confound it! you are going to travel by night; you do not know whom you may meet. I fancy that it is prudent to take precautions."

The two men exchanged a glance; they understood each other.

"That is true," the American said, carelessly; "now that I come to think of it, the roads are not safe. As you permit me, I will take these pistols, this rifle, machete, and knife."

"As you please, but pray take some ammunition; without that your fire-arms would be of no service."

"By jove! colonel, you think of everything, you are really an excellent fellow," he added, while carelessly loading his rifle and pistols, and fastening to his belt a powder flask and bullet pouch.

"You overwhelm me, Master Davis; I am only doing now what you would do in my place."

"Agreed. But you display a graciousness which confuses me."

"A truce, if you please, to further compliments. Here is your horse, which my assistant is bringing up."

"But he is leading a second; do you intend to accompany me beyond the advanced posts?"

"Oh, only for a few yards, if my company does not seem to you too wearisome."

"Oh, colonel, I shall always be delighted to have you for a companion."

All these remarks were made with an accent of excessive courtesy, in which, however, could be traced an almost imperceptible tinge of fun and biting raillery. The two men left the house and mounted their horses. The night was limpid and clear; millions of stars sparkled in the sky, which seemed studded with diamonds; the moon spread afar its white and fantastic light; the mysterious night breeze bowed the tufted crests of the trees, and softly rippled the silvery waters of the Rio Trinidad.

The two men walked side by side, passing the sentinels, who, at a signal from the colonel, respectfully stepped back. They soon descended the hill, passed the main-guard, and found themselves in the open country. They proceeded thus for more than an hour, and reached a spot where two paths, in crossing, formed a species of fork, in the centre of which stood a cross of evil omen.

As if by common accord, the two horses stopped and thrust out their heads, while laying back their ears and snorting loudly. Suddenly aroused from their reveries

and recalled to actual life. the two riders drew themselves up in the saddle, and bent a scrutinising glance around. No human sound disturbed the silence.

"Do you intend, my dear colonel," the American asked, "to honour me with your society any longer?"

"No," the young man answered, bluntly; "I shall stop here."

"Ah!" John Davis continued, with feigned disappointment, "shall we part already?"

"Oh no," the colonel answered, "not yet."

"In spite of the extreme pleasure I should feel in remaining longer in your company, I am obliged to continue my journey."

"Oh, you will surely grant me a few moments, Master Davis?" the other said.

"Well, a few moments, but no more; for I have a long distance to go, and whatever pleasure I feel in conversing with you——"

"You alone," the colonel interrupted him, "shall decide the time we shall remain together."

"It is impossible to display greater courtesy."

"Master Davis," the colonel said, raising his voice, "have you forgotten the last conversation we had together?"

"My dear colonel, you must know me well enough to be sure that I only forget those things which I ought not to remember."

"Which means?"

"That I perfectly well remember the conversation to which you allude."

"All the better. In that case your excellent memory spares me half the trouble."

"I believe so."

"Do you not find the spot where we are admirably adapted for what we have to do?"

"I consider it delicious, my dear colonel."

"Then, with your consent, we will dismount?"

"At your orders; there is nothing I detest so as a lengthened conversation on horseback."

They leaped to the ground and tied up their horses.

"Do you take your rifle?" the American inquired.

"Yes, if you have no objection."

"Not at all. Then we are going to see some sport?"

"Oh yes, but on this occasion the game will be human."

"Which will add greatly to the interest of the sport."

"Come, you are a delightful comrade, Master Davis."

"What would you, colonel? I never was able to refuse my friends anything."

"Where shall we place ourselves?"

"I leave that to you entirely."

"Look! on each side of the road are bushes, which seem to have grown for the express purpose."

"That is really singular. Well, we will each hide behind one of the bushes, count ten, and then fire."

"First-rate; but suppose we miss? I am perfectly well aware that we are both first-rate marksmen, and that is almost impossible; but it might happen."

"In that case nothing is more simple; we will draw our machetes and charge each other."

"Agreed. Stay, one word more; one of us must remain on the ground, I suppose?"

"I should think so. If not, what would be the use of fighting?"

"That is true; so promise me one thing."

"What is it?"

"The survivor will throw the body into the river."

The two men bowed, and then went off in opposite directions, to take up their stations. The distance between them was about seventy yards; in a few seconds a double detonation burst forth like a clap of thunder, and woke up the echoes. The two adversaries then rushed on each other, machete in hand. They met nearly half way, not uttering a word.

The combat lasted a long time, and threatened to continue longer, without any marked advantage for either of the champions, for they were nearly of equal strength, when all at once several men appeared, and ordered them to lay down their arms immediately. Each fell back a step, and waited.

"Stop!" the man shouted, "do you, John Davis, mount your horse and be off!"

"By what right do you give me that order?" the American asked, savagely.

"By the right of the stronger," the leader replied. "Be off, if you do not wish a misfortune to happen!"

John Davis looked around him. Any resistance was impossible—for what could he have done alone, merely armed with a sabre, against twenty individuals? The American stifled an oath, and mounted again, but suddenly reflecting, he asked, "And who may you be, who thus pretend to dictate to me?"

"You wish to know?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am a man to whom you and the colonel offered an atrocious insult. I am the Monk Antonio!"

At this name the two adversaries felt a thrill of terror run through their veins; without doubt the monk was about to avenge himself.

CHAPTER V.

BEFORE THE BATTLE.

JOHN DAVIS recovered almost immediately.

"Ah, ah!" he said, "then it is you, my master?"

"It astonishes you to meet me here."

"On my honour, no. Your place, in my opinion, is wherever a snare is laid."

"You are wrong, John Davis, to take advantage of a man's weakness to insult him, especially when ignorant of his intentions."

"Ah, they appear to me tolerably clear at this moment."

"What are you doing?"

"As you see, I am dismounting."

In fact, the American leapt from his horse, drew his pistols from the holsters, and walked toward the monk with a most quiet step and thoroughly natural air.

"Why do you not go, as I advised you to do?" Fray Antonio continued.

"For two reasons, my dear senor. The first is, that I have no orders or advice to receive from you; the second, because I shall not be sorry to be present at the pretty little act of scoundrelism you are meditating."

"Then your intention is—"

"To defend my friend, by Heaven!" the American exclaimed, warmly.

"What! your friend?" the monk said, in amazement: "why, only a minute ago you were trying to take his life."

"My dear senor," Davis remarked, ironically, "there are certain remarks whose sense you unhappily never catch. Understand me clearly: I am ready to kill this gentleman, but I will not consent to see him assassinated. That is clear enough, hang it all!"

Fray Antonio burst into a laugh.

"Singular man!" he said.

"Am I not?" Then turning to his adversary, who still stood perfectly quiet, he continued: "My dear colonel, we will resume, at a later date, the interesting interview which this worthy padre so untowardly interrupted. For the present, permit me to restore to you one of the pistols you so generously lent me; it is undoubted that these scamps will kill us; but, at any rate, we shall have the pleasure of settling three or four of them first."

"Thank you, Davis," the colonel answered, "I expected nothing less from you."

And he took the pistol, and cocked it. The American took his place by his side, and bowed to the stranger with mocking courtesy.

"Senores," he said, "you can charge us whenever you think proper, for we are prepared to sustain your charge bravely."

"Ah, ah!" said Fray Antonio, "then you really mean it?"

"Mean it? The question seems somewhat simple; I suppose you think the hour well chosen for a joke?"

The monk shrugged his shoulders, and turned to the men who accompanied him.

"Be off!" he said. "In an hour I will join you again, you know where."

The strangers gave a nod of assent, and disappeared almost instantaneously among the trees and shrubs. The monk then threw his weapons on the ground, and drew so near to the men as almost to touch them.

"Are you still afraid?" he said; "it is I now who am in your power."

"Halloh!" Davis said, as he uncocked his pistol, "why, what is the meaning of this?"

"If, instead of taking me as a bandit, as you did, you had taken the trouble to reflect, you would have understood that I had but one object, and that was, to prevent the resumption of the obstinate fight which my presence so unfortunately interrupted."

"But how did you arrive here so opportunely?"

"Accident did it all. Ordered by our commander-in-chief to watch the enemy's movements, I posted myself on the two roads, in order to take prisoner all the scouts who came in this direction."

"Then you do not owe either the colonel or myself any grudge?"

"Perhaps," he said, "I have not quite forgotten the unworthy treatment you inflicted on me; but I have given up all thoughts of vengeance."

John Davis reflected for a moment, and then said, as he offered him his hand, "You are a worthy monk. I see that you are faithful to the pledge of amendment you made. I am sorry for what I did."

"I will say the same, senor," the colonel remarked.

"One word now, senores."

"Speak," they said. "we are listening."

"Promise me not to renew that impious duel, and follow my example by forgetting your hatred."

The two men stretched out their hand with a simultaneous movement.

"That is well," he continued, "I am happy to see you act thus. Now let us separate. You, colonel, will mount and return to camp—the road is free. As for you, John Davis, please to follow me. Your long absence has caused a degree of alarm which your presence will doubtless dissipate."

"Good-bye for the present," the colonel said; "forget, Senor Davis, what passed between us at the outset of our meeting, and merely remember how we separate."

"May we, colonel, meet again under happier auspices, when I may be permitted to express to you all the sympathy with which your frank and loyal character inspires me."

After exchanging a few words more, and cordially shaking hands, the three men separated. Colonel Melendez set off in the direction of the rancho, while the monk and Davis started at an equal pace in exactly the opposite direction. It was about midnight when the colonel reached the main guard, where an aide-de-camp of the general was waiting for him.

"What is the matter?" the colonel asked the aide-de-camp.

"The general will tell you himself," the officer answered, "for he is impatiently expecting you, and has already asked several times for you."

"Oh, then, there is something new."

"I believe so."

The colonel pushed on a-head, and in a few minutes found himself before the house occupied by the general. The house was full of noise and light; but so soon as the general perceived the young man he left the officers with whom he was talking.

"Here you are at last," he said; "I was impatiently expecting you."

"What is the matter then?" the colonel asked, astounded at this reception, which he was far from expecting, for he had left the camp so quiet, and found it on his return so noisy.

"You shall know, senores," the general added, addressing the officers in the room, "be kind enough to go away. I shall be with you in an instant. Follow me, colonel."

Don Juan bowed, and passed into an adjoining room, the door of which the general shut after him. Hardly were they alone, ere the general took the young man affectionately by one of the coat-buttons, and fixed on him a glance that seemed trying to read his heart.

"Since your departure," he said, "we have had a visit from a friend of yours."

"A friend of mine?" the young man repeated.

"Or, at any rate, of a man who so gives himself out."

"I only know one man in this country," the colonel replied distinctly, "who, despite the opinions that divide us, can justly assume that title."

"And that man is?"

"The Jaguar."

"Do you feel a friendship for him?"

"Yes."

"But he is a bandit."

"Possibly he is so to you, general; from your point of sight, it is possible that you are right. I neither descry his character, nor condemn him; I am attached to him, for he saved my life."

"But you fight against him, for all that."

"Certainly; for being in two opponent camps, each of us serves the cause that appears to him the better. But, for all that, we are not the less attached to each other."

"I am not at all disposed to blame you, my friend, for our inclinations should be independent of our political opinions. But let us return to the subject which at this moment is the most interesting to us. A man, I say, presented himself during your absence at the outposts as being a friend of yours."

"That is strange," the colonel muttered, searching his memory; "and did he mention his name?"

"Of course: do you think I would have received him else? However, he is in this very house—he calls himself Don Felix Paz."

"Oh," the colonel exclaimed eagerly, "he spoke the truth, general, for he is really one of my dearest friends."

"I am the more pleased at what you tell me, because this man assured me that he held in his hands means that would enable us to give the rebels a tremendous thrashing."

"If he has promised it, general, he would do so without doubt. I presume you have had a serious conversation with him?"

"Not at all. You understand, my friend, that I was not willing, till I had previously conversed with you, to listen to this man."

"Capital reasoning; what do you propose doing now?"

"Hearing him; he told me enough for me, in the prevision of what is happening to have everything prepared for action at a moment's notice; hence no time will have been lost."

"Very good! we will listen to him then."

The general clapped his hands, and an aide-de-camp came in.

"Request Don Felix to come hither, captain."

Five minutes later the ex-major-domo of the Larch-tree hacienda entered the room where the two officers were.

"Forgive me, caballero," the general said courteously, "for the rather cold manner in which I received you; but unfortunately we live in a period when it is so difficult to distinguish friends from enemies, that a man involuntarily runs the risk of confounding one with the other, and making a mistake."

"You have no occasion to apologise to me, general," Don Felix answered.

The colonel pressed his friend's hand warmly. A lengthened explanation was unnecessary for men of this stamp; at the first word they understood each other. They had a lengthened conversation, which did not terminate till a late hour of the night, or rather an early hour of the morning, for it struck four at the moment when the general opened the door of the room in which they were shut up.

What had occurred during this lengthened interview? No one knew; not a syllable transpired as to the arrangements made by the general with the two men who had remained so long with him. The officers and soldiers were suffering from the most lively curiosity, which was only increased by the general's orders to raise the camp.

Don Felix was conducted by the colonel to the outermost point, where they separated after shaking hands.

"We shall meet again soon."

The colonel then returned at a gallop to his quarters, while Don Felix buried himself in the forest as rapidly as his horse could carry him. On returning to camp, the colonel at once ordered the boot and saddle to be sounded, and without waiting for further orders, put himself at the head of about five hundred cavalry.

It was nearly five in the morning, the sun was rising in floods of purple and gold, and all seemed to promise a magnificent day. The general, who had mounted to his observatory, attentively followed with a telescope the movements of the colonel, who, through the speed at which he went, not only got down the hill within a quarter of an hour, but had also crossed, without obstacle, a stream as wide as the Rio Trinidad itself.

When the last lancero had disappeared, and the landscape had become quite desolate, the general shut up his glass, and went down again. We have said that the garrison of Galveston consisted of nine hundred men; but this strength had been raised to nearly fourteen hundred by calling in the numerous small posts. Colonel Melendez had taken with him five hundred sabres the general left at the rancho, which he determined on retaining at all hazards as an important strategical point, two hundred and fifty men under the orders of a brave and experienced officer; and

he had at his disposal about six hundred and fifty men, supported by a battery of four mountain howitzers.

This force, small as it may appear, in spite of the smile of contempt it will doubtless produce on the lips of Europeans accustomed to the shock of great masses, was more than sufficient for the country.

The start from the rancho was effected with admirable regularity; the general had ordered that the baggage should be left behind, so that nothing might impede the march of the army. Each horseman, in accordance with the American fashion, which is too greatly despised in Europe, took up a foot soldier behind him. Numerous spies and scouts sent out to reconnoitre in every direction, had announced that the insurrectionary army, marching in two columns, was advancing to seize the mouth of the Trinidad and cover the approaches to Galveston, a movement which it was of the utmost importance to prevent. On the other hand, General Rubio had been advised that Santa Anna, President of the Republic, had left Mexico, and was coming with forced marches, at the head of twelve hundred men, to forcibly crush the insurrection.

General Rubio understood how important it was for him to deal a heavy blow before his junction with the president, who, while following his advice, would not fail, in the event of defeat, to attribute the reverses to him, while, if the Mexicans remained masters of the field, he would keep all the honour of victory to himself.

The Texan insurgents had not up to this moment dared to measure themselves with the Mexican troops in the open field, but the events that had succeeded each other during the last few days with lightning speed had, by accelerating the catastrophe, completely changed the aspect of affairs. The chiefs of the revolutionary army, rendered confident by their constant advantages, and masters without a blow of one of the principal Texan seaports, felt the necessity of giving up their hedge warfare.

To attain this end, a battle must be gained; but the Texan chiefs did not let themselves be deceived by the successes they had hitherto met with, successes obtained by rash strokes, surprises, and unexampled audacity: they feared with reason the moment when they would have to face the veteran Mexican troops with their inexperienced guerrillas. Hence they sought by every means to retard the hour for this supreme and decisive contest, in which a few hours might eternally overthrow their dearest hopes, and the work of regeneration they had been pursuing for the last ten years with unparalleled courage and resignation.

After the capture of the fort a grand council had been held by the principal Texan chiefs, in order to consult on the measures to be taken, so as not to lose, by any imprudence, results so miraculously obtained. It was then resolved that the army should occupy Galveston, which its position rendered perfectly secure against a surprise; that the freebooters should alone remain out to skirmish with the Mexicans and harass them; while the troops shut up in the town were being drilled.

The first care of the chiefs, therefore, was to avoid any encounter with the enemy, and try to enter Galveston without fighting. The following was the respective position of the two armies: the Texans were trying to avoid a battle, which General Rubio was longing, on the contrary, to fight. The terrain on which the adversaries would have to manœuvre was extremely limited, for scarce four leagues separated the videttes of the two armies.

In the meanwhile Colonel Melendez had continued to advance. On reaching the cross where he and John Davis had fought on the previous evening, the colonel himself examined the ground with the utmost care; then feeling convinced that none of the enemy's flankers had remained ambushed at this spot, which was so favourable for a surprise, he gave his men orders to dismount. The horses were thrown down, secured, and their heads wrapped in thick blankets to prevent them neighing, while

the soldiers lay down on their stomachs among the shrubs, with instructions not to stir.

General Rubio had himself effected a flank march, which enabled him to avoid the crossways; immediately after descending the hill, he marched rapidly upon the river bank. We have said that the Rio Trinidad, which is rather confined at certain spots, is bordered by magnificent forests, whose branches form on the bank grand arcades of foliage overhanging the mangroves; it was among the latter, and on the branches of the forest trees, about two gun-shots from the spot where he had landed that the general ambuscaded about one-third of his infantry. The remainder, divided into two corps, were echeloned along either side of the road the insurgents must follow, but it was done in the American fashion, that is to say, the men were so hidden in the tall grass that they were invisible.

The four mountain howitzers crowned a small hill which, through its position, completely commanded the road, while the cavalry was massed in the rear of the infantry. The silence momentarily disturbed was re-established, and the desert resumed its calm and solitary aspect. General Rubio had taken his measures so well that his army had suddenly become invisible.

When it was resolved in the council of the Texan chiefs that the insurrectionary army should proceed to Galveston, a rather sharp discussion took place as to the means to be adopted in reaching it. The Jaguar proposed to embark the troops aboard the corvette, the brig, and a few smaller vessels collected for the purpose. Unfortunately this advice, excellent though it was, could not be followed, owing to General Rubio's precaution of carrying off all the boats; collecting others would have occasioned an extreme loss of time; but as the boats the Mexicans had employed were now lying high and dry on the beach, and the guard at first put over them withdrawn a few hours later, the Texans thought it far more simple to set them afloat, and use them in their turn to effect the passage.

By a species of fatality the council would not put faith in the assertions of John Davies, who in vain assured them that General Rubio, entrenched in a strong position, would not allow this movement to be carried out without an attempt to prevent it; so that the abandonment of the boats by the Mexicans was only fictitious, and a trap adroitly laid to draw the Revolutionists to a spot where it would be easy to conquer them.

Unfortunately, the mysterious man to whom we have alluded, had alone the right to give orders, and the reasons urged by Davis could not convince him. Deceived by his spies, he persuaded himself that General Rubio, far from having any intention of recapturing Galveston, wished to effect his junction with Santa Anna.

This incomprehensible error was the cause of incalculable disasters. The chiefs received orders to march forward, and were constrained to carry them out. Still when this erroneous resolution had been once formed, the means of execution were selected with extreme prudence. The corvette and brig were ordered to get as near land as they could, in order to protect, by their cross fire, the embarkation of the troops, and sweep the Mexicans, if they offered any opposition. Flying columns were sent off in advance and on the flanks of the army, to clear the way, by making prisoners of any small outposts the enemy might have established.

Four principal chiefs commanded strong detachments of mounted freebooters. The four were the Jaguar, Fray Antonio, El Alferez, and Don Felix Paz, whom the reader assuredly did not expect to find under the flag of the rebels. These four chiefs were ordered by the commander-in-chief to prevent any surprise, by searching the forests and examining the tall grass. El Alferez was on the right of the army, Fray Antonio on the left, the Jaguar had the rear guard, while Don Felix, with six hundred sabres, formed the van. One word as to the guerillas of the ex-major-domo of the Larch-tree hacienda. The men who composed his band, raised on lands

dependent on the hacienda, had been enlisted by Don Felix. They were *Indios mansos*, vaqueros, and peons, mostly half savages, and rogues to a certain extent, who fought like lions at the order of their leader. Don Felix Paz had joined the insurgents about two months previously, and rendered them eminent service with his guerillas. Hence, he had in a short time gained general confidence.

By a singular coincidence, the two armies left their camp at the same time, and marched one against the other, little suspecting that two hours later they would be face to face.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BATTLE OF CERRO PARDO.

THE battle of Cerro Pardo was one of those sanguinary days, whose memory a nation retains for ages as an ill-omened date.

The spot selected by the Mexicans to effect their landing after leaving Galveston, had been very cleverly chosen by General Rubio. The stream, which, for some distance, is enclosed by high banks, runs at that spot through an extensive plain, covered with tall grass and clumps of trees. This plain is closed by a species of *cañon*, or very narrow gorge, enclosed between two lofty hills, whose scarped flanks are carpeted at all seasons with plants and flowers. These two hills are the Cerro Pardo and the Cerro Prieto.

At the canon begins a road, or, to speak more correctly, a rather wide track, bordered by logs and morasses, and running to the cross we have before visited. This road is the only one that can be followed in going from the interior to the sea-shore. A little in advance of the two hills, whose summit is covered with dense wood and scrub, extend marshes, which are the more dangerous because their surface is perfidiously covered with close green grass, which completely conceals from the traveller the terrible danger to which he is exposed if he venture on this moving abyss.

After what we have said, the reader will easily perceive that the enterprise attempted by the Texans was only possible in the event of the coast being entirely undefended; but under the present circumstances, the inconceivable obstinacy of the commander-in-chief was the more incomprehensible, because he was not only thoroughly acquainted with the country, but at the moment when the army was about to begin its forward movements, several spies came in in succession, bringing news which coincided with the positive reports made by John Davis.

Whom the gods wish to destroy, they first blind. This wise and thoughtful man, who had ever acted with extreme prudence, and whose conceptions up to this day had been remarkable for their lucidity, was deaf to all remonstrances, and the order was given to march. The army at once set out; Don Felix Paz went on a-head with his guerillas, while the Jaguar's cuadrilla, on the contrary, remained in the rear. Tranquil, in spite of the wounds he had received, would not remain in the fort; he came along lying in a cart, having at his side Carmela and Quoniam, who paid him the utmost attention; while Lanzi, at the head of a dozen picked freebooters, given him by the Jaguar, escorted the cart.

The Jaguar was sorrowful, a gloomy presentiment seemed to warn him of a misfortune. This daring man, who carried out as if in sport the maddest and most venturesome deeds, now advanced reluctantly, hesitating and constantly looking about him suspiciously, and almost timidly. Assuredly, he feared no personal danger; what did he care for an attack? what alarm did he feel about dying?

Peril was his element; the heated atmosphere of battle, the odour of powder, intoxicated him, and made him feel strange delight; but at this moment Carmela was near him; Carmela, whom he had so miraculously found, and whom he feared to lose. This strong man felt his heart soften at the thought, hence he insisted on taking the rear guard, in order to watch more closely over the maiden.

The superior commander had not dared to refuse the bold partizan this post, which he asked for as a favour. This condescension on the part of the chief had terrible consequences, and was partly the cause of the events that happened a few hours later.

The Texan troops advanced with an order and discipline that would have done honour to regulars. Don Felix Paz had thrown out to the right and left of the road flankers ordered to investigate the chapparal, and guarantee the safety of the route.

The vanguard reached the cross, and nothing had as yet happened in any way to trouble the march. Don Felix, after allowing his cuadrilla to halt for twenty minutes, resolutely entered the road that led to the spot where the Mexicans had landed. From the cross to the Rio Trinidad was no great distance, and could be covered in less than two hours by troops marching at the ordinary pace.

We have said that trembling prairies extended on either side this road.

The Texan vanguard passed the cross at about nine A.M. It had halted for about twenty minutes and then resumed its march. Still, without any apparent motive, after crossing without obstacle the defile of the Cerro Pardo, instead of advancing in the direction of the river, on the bank of which the stranded boats could already be seen, Don Felix ordered his cuadrilla to wheel at about two hundred yards from the defile, and formed a front of fifty horses by ten deep. After commanding a halt, he dug his spurs in and returned to the gorge alone.

While galloping, the partizan looked searchingly around him. As far as the eye could see, the road was entirely deserted. Don Felix halted and bent over his horse's neck, as if wishing to arrange some buckle, but while patting his noble animal he twice repeated the croak of a rook. At once the harsh cry of the puffin rose from the bushes that bordered the right-hand side of the road; the branches were then parted—a man appeared—it was Colonel Don Juan Melendez de Gongora.

"Return to your ambush, colonel," said Don Felix, "you know that there is an eye in every leaf. If I am seen alone on the road my presence will arouse no suspicions; but you must not be seen. We can converse equally well at a distance."

"You are always prudent, Don Felix."

"I? not at all; I merely wish to avenge myself on those bandits who have plundered so many haciendas."

"Whatever be the motive that impels you, it gives you good inspirations, that is the main point. But let us return to our business: what do you want with me?"

"Merely to know two things."

"What are they?"

"Whether General Rubio is really satisfied with the plan I submitted to him?"

"You have a proof of it before you; if he were not so, should I be here?"

"That is true."

"Now for the second."

"That is of an extremely delicate nature."

"Ah, ah! you pique my curiosity," the colonel said, laughingly.

Don Felix frowned and lowered his voice.

"It is very serious, Don Juan," he continued; "I wish, before the battle, to know if you have retained towards me that esteem and friendship with which you deigned to honour me at the Larch-tree hacienda?"

The colonel turned away in embarrassment.

"Why ask that question at this moment?" he remarked.

Don Felix turned pale and fixed a flashing glance upon him.

"Answer me, I implore you, Don Juan," he said, pressingly. "Whatever you may think, whatever opinion you may have of me, I wish to know it."

"Do not press me, I beg, Don Felix. What can you care for any opinion I may have?"

"What can I care, do you ask?" he exclaimed hotly; "but it is, indeed, useless to press you further, for I know all I wish to know. Thank you, Don Juan, I ask no more. When a man of so noble a character and such a loyal heart as yours condemns the conduct of another man, it is because that conduct is blameable."

"Well, be it so; since you absolutely insist, I will explain my views, Don Felix. Yes, I blame but do not condemn you, for I cannot and will not be your judge. Don Felix, I am convinced in my soul and conscience that the man who makes himself, no matter the motive that impels him, the agent of treachery, commits worse than a crime, for he is guilty of an act of cowardice."

The ex-major-domo listened to these harsh words with a forehead dripping with perspiration, but with head erect and eye sparkling with a gloomy fire.

"It is well," he said; "your words are rude, but they are true. I thank you for your frankness, Don Juan; I know now what remains for me to do."

The colonel, who had involuntarily allowed his feelings of the moment to carry him away, fancied that he had gone too far.

"Don Felix," he added, "forgive me; I spoke to you like a madman."

"Come, come, Don Juan," he replied, with a bitter smile, "do not attempt to recall your words; you were but the echo of my conscience; what you have said aloud my heart has often whispered to me. But enough of this; I notice a dust, which probably announces our friends," he added, with a poignant irony. "Farewell, Don Juan, farewell."

And, not waiting for the answer, Don Felix spurred his horse, turned hastily round, and went off rapidly.

"Alas!" muttered the colonel, "that man is now more unhappy than culpable, or I am greatly mistaken; if he be not killed to-day it will not be for want of seeking death."

Meanwhile, the Texan army rapidly advanced; like the Mexicans, each mounted man had a foot soldier behind him. At about a gun-shot from the cross roads, the Texans came upon the edge of the trembling prairie; they were consequently obliged to halt in order to call in their flankers.

The order of march was now necessarily altered, for the path grew narrower at every step, and the cavalry were unable to keep their ranks. However, the vanguard had not announced any danger. The army, trusting in the experience of the officer detached to clear the way, marched in perfect security.

The Jaguar alone did not share the general confidence: accustomed for a long period to a war of ambushes, the ground he now trod seemed to him so suitable in every way for a surprise, that he could not persuade himself that they would reach the sea-shore without an attack.

There is nothing so terrible as such a situation, where a man is obliged to stand on his defence against space. The desert tranquilly surrounds him on all sides, in vain does he interrogate the air and earth, to find a clue which constantly escapes him, and yet he has in his heart a certainty for which he finds it impossible to account.

The Jaguar resolved, whatever the consequences might be, to avoid personally a surprise, whose results would be disastrous to those he had vowed to protect and defend. Gradually slackening the pace of his detachment, he succeeded in leaving a sufficiently wide distance between himself and the main body, to regain almost

entirely his liberty of action. His first care was to collect round the cart the men in whom he placed most confidence.

It could not enter the Jaguar's mind that the Mexicans would not profit by the opportunity offered them by the imprudence of the Texans, to try and take their revenge for the defeats they had suffered. In this view he was entirely supported by Davis, who, it will be remembered, had urgently, though vainly, begged the commander-in-chief to give up his plan. The two men, who had been so long acquainted, understood each other, and John Davis immediately spread out his men, as a forlorn hope, on either side the road. The Jaguar proceeded to the cart after this, and addressed the hunter.

"Well, Tranquil," he said, "how do you feel?"

"Better," the other answered; "I hope within a few days to be sufficiently recovered to rise."

"And your strength?"

"Is rapidly returning."

"All the better. Would you be capable of firing in your own defence, without leaving the cart?"

"I think so. But do you fear any trap? the spot where we now are, appears most favourable for it."

"Does it not! Well, I fear an ambushade. Here is a rifle, and if needs must, make use of it."

"Trust to me. Thanks," he added, as he clutched the weapon with delight.

The Jaguar then placed himself at the head of his troop, and gave orders to set out again. Long before this, the main body of the army had passed the cross, the heads of the columns were already entering the defile, a movement which, owing to the narrowness, produced some disorder the leaders were trying to repress, when suddenly a shower of canister burst from the Cerro Pardo, and made wide gaps in the crowded ranks of the Texans. At the same instant a terrible shout was heard from the other end of the gorge, and Don Felix Paz' cuadrilla appeared galloping at full speed toward the main body.

At the first moment the Texans had to make way for these horsemen, whom they supposed to be closely pursued by a still invisible enemy; but their surprise changed into terror and stupor when they saw this vanguard dash at them and mercilessly sabre them.

The Texans were betrayed! suffering from a terror that almost attained to madness, unable to form in this limited spot, decimated by the canister incessantly discharged at them, and sabred by Don Felix' cuadrilla, they had but one thought—that of flight. But at the moment when they tried to run, the terrible cry of "Mejico! Mejico! mueran los rebeldes!" resounded in their rear, and Colonel Melendez, at the head of his five hundred horses, dashed at the Texans.

The medley then assumed the fearful proportions of a butchery.

Flight was impossible, and resistance seemed the same. At this supreme hour, when all appeared lost and the cause of liberty was about to be eternally buried under the pile of corpses, an irresistible movement suddenly took place in the terrified crowd, which opened like a ripe fruit through the bloody track thus made by main force. The Jaguar now dashed forward, splendid in his wrath and despair, brandishing his machete above his head, and followed by his brave cuadrilla. A cry of delight saluted the arrival of the daring freebooter.

"My lads!" the Jaguar shouted, in a voice that rose above the din of battle, "we are surrounded by the enemy, and have been betrayed and led into a trap by a coward. Let us show these Mexicans what men like ourselves are capable of. Follow me—forward! forward!"

"Forward!" the Texans vociferated, electrified by these daring words.

The Jaguar made his horse bound, and dashed at the side of the mountain. His military instinct had not deserted him, for that was, in fact, the key of the battle. The Texans rushed after him, brandishing their weapons and uttering yells of fury. But at this moment the troops of General Rubio made their appearance, who had hitherto remained ambushed behind the trees and bushes; they crowned the heights, lined the sides of the road, and the fight began again more terrible and obstinate than before. The efforts were useless; the Texans returned eight times to the assault of the Cerro Pardo, and eight times were driven back.

In vain did the Jaguar, Davis, Fray Antonio, El Alferez, and the other chiefs perform prodigies of valour; the Mexican bullets decimated their soldiers. The commander-in-chief of the army, who by his imprudence had caused this grave disaster, resolved to make a final and supreme effort. Collecting around him all the willing men who still attempted resistance, he formed them into a column of attack, and dashed like a whirlwind at the Mexican guns, the artillerymen of which were cut down. Surprised by this sudden and furious charge, the Mexicans broke and abandoned the battery; this audacious attempt might change the issue of the battle. Already the Texans, who were almost masters of the plateau, were preparing to take advantage of this fortuitous and unhopèd-for success; but unfortunately, the revolutionary army, nearly entirely demoralised, did not support with the necessary vigour the heroic effort of these few chosen braves; the Mexicans had time to recover from their surprise and compare their strength with that of their foes. Ashamed of the check they had suffered, they rushed upon the enemy, and after a frightful hand-to-hand fight, they succeeded in driving the Texans from the plateau.

Colonel Melendez and Don Felix Paz had at length effected their junction; the Texans had not even the possibility of flight left them, but the Jaguar did not yet despair; still, since he could no longer conquer, he would at least save Carmela. But between her and him stood a human wall, through which he must clear a road. The young man did not hesitate; turning like a wounded lion, he bounded into the midst of the enemy's ranks.

"Ah! the traitor Don Felix!" the Jaguar shouted on recognising him, and split his skull open.

Then he rushed like an avalanche down the mountain-side, overthrowing every one he came across; and followed by a few of his most devoted companions, the ranks of the Mexicans opened to let them pass.

"Thanks, brother," the Jaguar shouted to Colonel Melendez, who had given a sign to let him pass.

The colonel turned away and made no answer. The carnage lasted a long time, as the Texans would not accept quarter. Six hundred Texans fell into the hands of the victors, while eight hundred were killed.

The same evening General Rubio re-entered Galveston at the head of his victorious army; the insurrectionists fled in terror in all directions.

The Jaguar, on reaching the cross roads, found the cart smashed, and most of its defenders dead on the ground. Singular to say, they had all been scalped. Tranquil, Quoniam, Carmela, and Lanzi had disappeared.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ATEPETL.

TEXAS is intersected by a line of continuous forests, which runs from the sources of the Rio Trinidad to the Arkansas river. These forests are called the "Cross

Timbers," behind which commence the immense prairies on which countless herds of buffalos and wild horses wander about at liberty.

In the centre of a narrow valley, enclosed on three sides by the denuded and serrated crests of the mountains—and on the banks of the Rio Sabina, a little above its confluence with the Vermejo, where it still flows wide and transparent between undulating banks, bordered by clumps of cotton-wood trees and dwarf palms—an Indian village was deliciously scattered among the trees. This village was a winter atepetl of the Comanche Indians, belonging to the Antelope tribe. We will describe in a few words this village.

This village, excepting on the side turned to the Sabina river, was surrounded by a palisade about fifteen feet high, made of enormous trunks of trees, fastened together with strips of bark and wooden cramp-hooks. At about five or six hundred yards from the atepetl was the cemetery, the exhalations from which, by disagreeably affecting the traveller's sense of smell, advised him that he was approaching an Indian tribe.

Two months after the battle of the Cerro Pardo, and about an hour before sunset, on a delicious afternoon of September—which the Indians call the Moon of the Wild Oats—several riders, mounted on fiery mustangs, painted of several colours, and adorned with plumes and bells, were following, while conversing, a winding path, which runs for several leagues along the winding course of the Rio Sabina, and terminates at the winter village of the Antelope Comanches.

These horsemen, five in number, were armed with rifles, tomahawks, and machetes. They wore the cotton hunting-shirt of the wood-rangers fastened round the waist, *mitasses*, or trousers in two pieces tied at the ankles, fur caps, and Indian mocassins. Still, although this costume was almost identical with that worn by the majority of the Indian tribes, in whom constant contact with the Americans has produced a sort of bastard civilisation, it was easy to recognise these riders as white men.

About two hundred yards behind the horsemen came a sixth, mounted and dressed like them, but who was assuredly a red-skin. His head, instead of being covered by a fur cap, was bare; his hair, pulled up at the top of his head, and stained with red ochre, was fastened with strips of snake-skin; a falcon feather stuck in above his right ear, near his war-scalp lock, indicating his claim to high rank among his countrymen, while the numerous wolf-tails fastened to his heels proved that he was a renowned warrior; in his right hand he held a fan made of the entire wing of an eagle, and in his left he waved the short-handled and long-lashed whip, peculiar to the Comanche and Sioux Indians.

These riders employed none of the precautions usual on the prairie to avoid surprises, or foil the enemies generally ambushed in the track of hunters. From the way in which they conversed together, and the absent glances they at times took across the country, rather through habit than any prudential motive, it might easily be guessed that these men were reaching a spot perfectly well known to them, and where they felt certain of not falling into a trap. Still, had they not been absorbed in their conversation, and could their glances have pierced the dense curtain of verdure that formed a fragrant wall on their right, they would have seen amid the shrubs and lower branches of the trees an agitation not at all natural, and doubtless produced by the passage of a wild beast; at times, too, they might have noticed two eyes flashing among the leaves which were fixed upon them with a savage expression of passion and hatred.

But, we repeat, these men, who, however, were wood-rangers, renowned in these parts for their almost miraculous sagacity and skill, were so completely absorbed in their conversation, they felt so sure of having no snare to apprehend, their eyes and ears were so thoroughly closed, that they appeared blind and deaf, although ordinarily not the slightest noise or the most futile object escaped their notice.

On coming within pistol-shot of the village, the horsemen stopped to give the Indian time to rejoin them. So soon as the latter perceived this halt, he whipped his horse, and ranged up alongside his comrades. He stopped his horse, and waited silently and calmly till he should be addressed.

"What are we to do now, chief?" one of the travellers asked. "So soon as we have passed that projecting point we shall be at the valley."

"Our pale brothers are brave; the Comanches will be happy to receive them and burn powder in their honour. A chief will go alone to the village."

"Go then, chief; we will await you here."

"Wah! my brother has spoken well."

The Indian vigorously lashed his horse, which bounded ahead and speedily disappeared behind the peak to which the hunter had pointed. The horsemen drew up in line and waited motionless with their hands on their weapons. In a very few minutes a noise was heard resembling the rolling of thunder, and suddenly a crowd of mounted Indians appeared, coming at full speed, brandishing their weapons, discharging their guns, howling and whistling in the long *iskochéttas* made of human thigh-bones, which they wore hanging from their necks.

On their side, the hunters, at a sign from the man who appeared to be their leader, made their horses curvet, and discharged their weapons with repeated shouts and demonstrations of joy. For half an hour there was a deafening noise, augmented by the yells of the squaws and children who flocked up, blowing shells and rattling *chichikours*, and the barking of the thousands of savage and half-tamed dogs which the Indians constantly take about with them. It was plain that the strangers, to whom the red-skins, generally so haughty and retiring, offered so warm and friendly a reception, were great friends of the tribe: for, had it been otherwise, a deputation of chiefs would have met them at the entrance of the village to do them the honour of the *atepetl*, but the brave and renowned warriors would not have thought it requisite to get under arms.

All at once the noise ceased as if by enchantment, and the Indian horsemen ranged themselves in a semi-circle in front of the white hunters. A few paces before the line, four principal chiefs, mounted on magnificent mustangs, formed a separate group. These warriors, completely armed and painted for war, wore the great cap of feathers which only renowned warriors who have raised many scalps are entitled to assume; their shoulders were decked with superb necklaces of grizzly bears' claws, five inches long, and white at the tips; behind them floated the wide white buffalo-robe, painted red inside, and on which their exploits were designed; in one hand they held their guns, in the other a fan made of the wing of a white-headed eagle. These Indian warriors, clothed in such a magnificent costume, had something majestic and imposing about them that inspired respect.

For some ten minutes the Indians and hunters stood thus, motionless and silent, in presence of each other, when suddenly a fresh horseman appeared, coming at full speed from the village. He was a white man, dressed in the garb of a wood-ranger, and two magnificent greyhounds leaped up playfully on either side of his horse. At the appearance of the new comer the Indians burst into yells of joy.

"The great brave of the Antelope Comanches! Loyal Heart, Loyal Heart!"

The warrior was really the Mexican hunter, who has already made his appearance several times during the course of our narrative.

"My brother Black-deer has informed me of the arrival of great friends of our nation," he said, "and I have hurried up to witness their reception."

"Why has not the Black-deer accompanied our brother the great brave of the tribe?" one of the chiefs asked.

"The sachem wished to remain in the village and watch the preparation of the medicine-lodge."

The chief bowed, but said nothing further. Loyal Heart then put his horse at a gallop and advanced toward the hunters.

"You are welcome here, Tranquil," Loyal Heart said; "yourself and your comrades were expected."

"Thank you," Tranquil answered; "many events have happened since our separation. It certainly is not our fault that we did not arrive sooner."

The five white hunters were all old acquaintances—Tranquil, Lanzi, Quoniam, John Davis, and Fray Antonio. How was it that the American and the monk had joined the three wood-rangers? We shall explain that to the reader in the proper place.

"Sachems of the Antelope tribe," said Loyal Heart, taking Tranquil's right hand, "this pale hunter is my brother; his heart is good, his arm strong, and his tongue is not forked; he loves the red-men; he is renowned as a great brave in his nation, he is wise at the council fire; love him, for the Master of Life sustains him, and has removed the skin from his heart, in order that his blood may be pure and the words he utters such as a wise warrior ought to pronounce."

"Wah!" one of the sachems answered, with a graceful bow; "the Comanches are great warriors; who can tell the extent of the hunting-grounds the Great Spirit has given them? They are the masters of the red-men because they are all great braves, whose heels are adorned with numerous wolf-tails. My pale brother and his warriors will enter the atepetl; they will receive callis, horses, and squaws to clean their arms and prepare their food, and the tribe of Antelope Comanches will count five braves more. I have spoken."

"Chief," Tranquil replied, "I thank you for the hearty reception you are pleased to offer me. My brother, Loyal Heart, has told you the truth about my feelings. I love the red-men, and especially the Comanches, who, of all the nations dwelling on the prairies, are the noblest and most courageous, and rightly call themselves the queen nation of the prairies. In my own name and that of my comrades I accept your frank and cordial hospitality."

The principal sachem then took off his buffalo-robe, with a gesture full of dignity, and placed it on the shoulders of the hunter, while the other chiefs did the same to his comrades.

"Warriors and braves of the Antelope tribe," he said, turning to the Indians, still motionless and silent, "these pale-faces are henceforth our brothers."

At these words the shouts and yells recommenced with fresh vigour, and the Indians displayed signs of the liveliest joy. Possibly this joy was not so real as it appeared, and was not equally shared by all present.

Indian policy, very logical in this as in many other things, orders the natives to seek at any price an alliance with the whites, whose recognised skill in the management of arms, and profound knowledge of the manners of their countrymen, may at a given moment be of great service to the Indians, either in the interminable wars they wage against each other, or to defend them against the soldiers and armed colonists, whom the civilised governments surrounding them frequently send to take vengeance for incursions on the territories of the white men.

After the final ceremony we have described, the Indian sachems took the white hunters in their midst, and, placing themselves at the head of their warriors, started at a gallop for the village. At the entrance Black-deer was waiting for them, surrounded by the most important and wisest sachems of the tribe. Without uttering a syllable, he took the head of the column and led it to the centre of the village, near the ark of the first man. On reaching it the Indians suddenly halted, as if the feet of their horses were imbedded in the ground. Black-deer then stationed himself at the doorway of the medicine-lodge, between the hachesto, who held in his hand the totem of the tribe, and the pipe-bearer, who supported the sacred calumet.

"Who are the pale men who thus enter as friends the atepetl of the Antelope Comanches?" he asked.

"They are brothers, who ask leave to sit by the nearth of the red-men," answered Loyal Heart.

"It is well," Black-deer continued; "these men are our brothers. The council-fire is lighted; they will enter with us the lodge of the great medicine, sit down by the fire and smoke *morichee* from the sacred calumet with the sachems of the nation."

"Let it be as my brother has decided," Loyal Heart responded.

Black-deer gave a wave of the hand, upon which the hachesto raised the curtained door of the lodge, and the chiefs entered, followed by the hunters.

When all the chiefs had entered the lodge the hachesto let the curtain fall again that formed the entrance. A band of picked warriors immediately surrounded the lodge to keep off the curious, and insure the secrecy of the deliberations. The Indians are excessively strict about the laws of etiquette; with them everything is regulated with a minuteness we should be far from expecting among a semi-barbarous nation; and each is bound by the severest penalties to conform to the ceremonial.

Thus Black-deer was perfectly well aware who the pale-faces were that reached the village, since he had acted as their guide. But etiquette demanded that he should receive them as he had done, for otherwise the other chiefs might have been scandalised by such a breach of custom, and the strangers would, in all probability, have fallen victims to their forgetfulness of the usages of the nation.

The chiefs crouched silently in the centre of the lodge. The hachesto then presented Black-deer with a medicine-rod, to the end of which was attached a piece of lighted ocote wood. The sachem kindled the fire. The pipe-bearer then entered the lodge, bearing on his shoulder the sacred calumet, which must never touch the ground. The pipe-bearer is usually selected from among the most renowned warriors of the tribe, whom a wound in battle has rendered unfit for active service.

At a sign from Black-deer the pipe-bearer lit the calumet with a medicine-rod; he then presented the end of the tube to the chief, while holding the bowl in the palm of his right hand. Black-deer inhaled the smoke twice, and then blew it out in the direction of the four cardinal points, saying, "Master of Life! powerful Wacondah! may the smell of the morichee delight thy nostrils! regard us with a favourable eye, as thy well-beloved children! As I breathe this smoke toward thee, blow into our bosoms the wisdom that ought to preside at our councils!"

After pronouncing these words, Black-deer inhaled the smoke twice, and then passed the tube to the next chief. The latter silently puffed forth the smoke, and passed the pipe on to his neighbour. The calumet thus went the round of the company, and returned to Black-deer. When all the tobacco was consumed, the pipe-bearer emptied the burning ash into the council fire, saying—

"The Master of Life has received the offering of the Comanche sachems. All the rites are accomplished, the auguries are favourable; the council is opened."

After speaking thus, the pipe-bearer withdrew, and the chiefs remained alone.

On this occasion the council had two very serious questions to discuss. In the first place it was proposed to organise a great expedition against the Buffalo Apaches, a plundering tribe, who had several times stolen horses from the very villages of the Comanches, and on whom the sachems desired to take exemplary revenge. Secondly, Tranquil, through the medium of Loyal Heart, whose influence was great with the tribe, requested that a band of picked braves, amounting to fifty, and placed under the command of Loyal Heart, should be entrusted to him for an expedition, the object of which he could not divulge at the moment.

The first question was, after several speeches, unanimously resolved in the affirmative. The council was proceeding to discuss the second, when a loud noise was

head outside, the curtain of the medicine-lodge was raised, and the hachesto walked in. Let us shortly explain what the hachesto of an Indian village is. The hachesto is a man who must be gifted with a loud and powerful voice. He represents among the red-skins the town-crier, and his duty is to make news public, and convene the chiefs to council. When he made his appearance in the lodge, Black-deer gave him an angry glance.

"When the chiefs are assembled in the medicine-lodge, they must not be disturbed," he said to him.

"My father, Wah-Rush-a-Menec, speaks well," the Indian answered, "his son knows it."

"Then, why has my son entered without orders?"

"Because five warriors of the Buffalo Apaches have arrived at the village."

"Wah! and who is the brave that has made them prisoners? why has he not taken their scalps?"

The hachesto shook his head.

"My father is mistaken," he said; "these warriors have not been made prisoners, they are free."

"Ooehst!" said Black-deer with a surprise he could not conceal; "how then did they enter the village?"

"Openly, in the sight of all; they call themselves ambassadors."

"Ambassadors! and who is the chief that marches at their head?"

"Blue-fox."

"Blue-fox is a great brave. . He is a terrible warrior in fight; his arm has raised many scalps belonging to my sons; his hand has robbed them of many horses. But his presence is disagreeable. What does he want?"

"To enter the medicine-lodge, and explain to the sachems the mission with which he is entrusted."

"It is well," said Black-deer, giving an inquiring glance to the members of the council.

The latter replied by a nod of assent. Loyal Heart rose—

"My pale brothers, I must not be present at the deliberation that is about to take place," he remarked; "will the chief permit me to retire?"

"Loyal Heart is a son of the Comanches," Black-deer answered; "his place is among us, for, if he be young in years, his experience and wisdom are great. But he can do as he pleases—the pale hunters can retire."

The young man bowed ceremoniously, and withdrew, followed by the hunters, who, we must confess, were delighted at getting away, for they felt the need of rest after the fatigue they had undergone.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOSPITALITY.

WE have said that some callis had been got ready for the hunters. These callis, built like those of the Indians, were, however, comfortable enough for men who, accustomed to desert life, despise the superfluities of towns. On quitting the medicine-lodge, Loyal Heart led the travellers to two callis communicating with each other; then, making Tranquil a sign to follow him, he left the four hunters to make themselves as jolly as they could.

"As for you, my friend," he said, "I hope you will accept the hospitality my modest abode offers."

"Why put yourself to trouble for me?" the Canadian replied: "the slightest thing suffices me."

"I do not put myself out at all; on the contrary, I feel a real pleasure in giving you a place at my fireside."

"As it is so, I no longer resist; do what you please with me."

"Thanks! come on then."

Without farther remark, they crossed the village-square, which was almost deserted at this moment, for night had fallen some time previously, and most of the Indians had retired to their wigwams.

Loyal Heart, after walking for some minutes, stopped before a calli of sufficiently singular appearance to surprise Tranquil. This calli, which anywhere else would have been quite common-place, appeared strange in an Indian village. It was a rather large rancho, built in the Mexican fashion, of planks painted of a dazzling whiteness. It formed a parallelogram, the roof was flat, and in front of the door was a porch formed of six enormous trees fastened together, and covered with an azotea. On either side the door, three windows were pierced in the frontage, and these windows had glass panes.

A man of about fifty years of age, tall and thin, and dressed in the Mexican garb, was smoking a cigarette as he sat on an equial in the porch. This man, whose hair was turning grey, had the placid though resolute look of men who have suffered greatly.

"Ah," the man said, as he bowed to the hunter, "it is you, mi amo! you return home very late."

These words were uttered in that affectionate tone which is so pleasing in the mouth of an old servant.

"That is true, Nô Eusebio," the young man answered with a smile, as he squeezed the hand of the old man, whom those of our readers who have perused the "Trappers of Arkansas" have doubtless recognised: "I bring a friend."

"He is welcome," Nô Eusebio answered; "we will try to give him as hearty a welcome as he deserves."

"Oh, oh, gossip!" Tranquil remarked, gaily; "I shall not put you out much."

"Come in, my friend," said Loyal Heart; "I should not like to keep my mother waiting any longer."

"The senora is so restless when you are out late."

"Announce us; Nô Eusebio, we follow you."

The servant turned to obey, but the rastreros had long ago announced the hunter's return to his mother, by rushing madly into the house, hence the lady appeared in the doorway. At the moment when we meet Dona Garillas again, she was no longer the young charming woman, with such pure and soft beauty, whom we saw in the prologue of the "Trappers"; eight years had passed over her; eight long years of agony, alarm, and grief. She was still young and lovely, it is true, but this beauty had ripened beneath the blast of adversity. Her pale forehead and calm features wore the expression of resignation which the old sculptor succeeded in rendering on the bust of Melancholy. When she saw her son her eyes sparkled.

"Caballero," she said, in a gentle and melodious voice, "enter this modest abode, where you have been impatiently expected for a long time. Although our hearth be small, we keep a nook for a friend."

"Senora," the hunter replied with a bow, "your reception overcomes me with joy."

They entered the rancho, whose interior corresponded exactly with the exterior. A candil, suspended from a beam, illumined a rather large room, the furniture of

which consisted merely of a few equipals, two butaccas, and a chiffonier, all clumsily made with the hatchet. On the white-washed walls hung four of those coloured engravings with which Parisian commerce inundates both hemispheres.

By the care of Dona Garillas and Nô Eusebio, a frugal meal was prepared for the travellers, who now sat down to table. Tranquil, especially, who had made a long journey, experienced that feeling of internal comfort which is produced after long fatigue.

The meal was most simple; it consisted of frijoles with pimento, a lump of venison, and maize tortillas, the whole washed down with smilax water and a few mouthfuls of pulque, a wonderful luxury in these regions. Nô Eusebio sat down with the hunters. The lady waited on them, and did the honours of her house with that kindly and graceful attention so rarely met with in our civilised countries, where everything is so expensive, even a kind reception. When the meal was ended, which was not long first, the three men rose from the table and seated themselves round a copper brasero full of hot ashes, when they began smoking.

The greatest silence prevailed in the village; the songs and laughter had gradually died out; the Indians were asleep or appeared to be so. Dona Garillas had made in the corner of the room a bed of furs, which would seem delicious to a man accustomed, during the course of his adventurous life, to sleep most nights on the bare ground, and she was about to invite the hunter to rest his weary limbs, when the dogs raised their heads sharply, and began growling.

"'Tis a friend," Loyal Heart said; "open, Nô Eusebio."

The old servant obeyed, and an Indian stalked in; it was Black-deer. The chief's face was gloomy; he bowed slightly to the company, and, without saying a syllable, sat down on an equal placed for him near the brasero. The hunters were too conversant with the Indian character to question the chief, so long as he was pleased to keep silence. Tranquil, however, drew his pipe from his lips, and handed it to Black-deer, who began smoking, after thanking him with one of those emphatic gestures usual with the red-skins. At last the chief raised his head.

"The chiefs have left the council lodge," he said.

"Ah!" Loyal Heart replied.

"No determination was formed, no answer given the envoy?"

"The sachems are prudent: they wished to reflect."

The sachem nodded in affirmation.

"Does my brother Loyal Heart wish to learn what happened at the council after his departure?" he asked.

"My brother is sad; let him speak."

"The chief will eat first," Dona Garillas remarked; "he remained late at the council; the squaws have not prepared his evening meal."

"My mother is good," he replied with a smile, "Black-deer will eat; he is here in the wigwam of the brother of his heart."

"My mother will retire to sleep," said Loyal Heart. "I will wait on my brother."

"Be it so," the red-skin answered; "my mother needs rest—the night is advanced."

Dona Garillas understood that the three men had to talk about secret affairs, so, after bidding her guests good-night, she withdrew. As for Nô Eusebio, considering his presence unnecessary, he went to bed after the Indian's arrival, that is to say, lay down on a hammock, suspended in the porch of the house, with the two rastros at his feet, so that no one could enter or leave the house without awakening him.

"My brother Loyal Heart is young," Black-deer began, "but his wisdom is great; the chiefs have confidence in him, and would not decide anything till they had heard him."

"My brothers know that I am devoted to them. If my brother will explain, I will answer him."

"Blue-fox arrived at the village. He came on the part of the chiefs of his nation; Blue-fox has put on the skin of the timid asshatas, his words are gentle and his mouth distils honey; but the buffalo cannot leap like the elk, or the hawk imitate the dove. The chiefs did not put faith in his words."

"Then they answered him in the negative?"

"My brother will listen. The pale-faces on the other side of the Meche-chebe dug up the war-hatchet against each other some moons ago, as my brother is aware."

"I know it, chief, and so do you. But how does it concern us? a quarrel among the whites cannot affect us in any way, so long as they do not invade our hunting-grounds, do not steal our horses, or burn our villages."

"My brother speaks like a wise man; the sachems are of the same opinion."

"Good; I cannot understand, then, what reason can have determined the chiefs to discuss such a subject."

"Wah! my brother can speedily understand if he will listen."

"Chief, you red-skins have an unhappy knack of wrapping up your thoughts in so many words, that it is impossible to guess the point you are aiming at."

Black-deer broke into a silent laugh.

"My brother knows how to discover a trail better than any one," he said.

"Certainly; but to do so I must be shown a footstep or trace, however feeble it may be."

"And my brother has discovered the trail, which I merely indicated to him?"

"Yes."

"Oh! I should be curious to know my brother's thoughts."

"Then listen to me in your turn, Black-deer; I shall be brief. Blue-fox was sent by the Buffalo Apaches to the Antelope Comanches to propose to them an offensive and defensive alliance against one of the two nations of the pale-faces which have dug up the hatchet."

In spite of all the phlegm which nature and Indian training had endowed him with, the chief could not conceal the amazement he experienced.

"It is well," he said; "my brother is not only a great brave and daring warrior, but is also a man inspired by the Wacondah; he knows everything. Blue-fox made this proposition to the sachems."

"And have they accepted it?"

"No; I repeat to my brother that they would not give any answer till they heard his opinion."

"Very good, then. This is my opinion, and the chiefs can follow it or not, as they please. The Comanche nation is the Queen of the Prairies; the most invincible warriors assemble beneath its totem; its hunting-ground extends over the whole earth; the Comanches alone are indomitable. Why should they ally themselves with the Apache thieves? Blue-fox is a renegade from the Snake-Pawnees; my brother knows him, since he is his personal enemy. Any peace proposed by such an ambassador must conceal a trap; sooner war."

There was a rather lengthened silence, during which the chief reflected deeply on what he had just heard.

"My brother is right," he said at last; "wisdom resides in him, his tongue is not forked, the words he utters are inspired by the Wacondah! The Comanches will not treat with the plundering Apaches."

"My brothers, if they do that, will act like wise men."

"They will do it. I have now to speak to my brother on a matter that interests me personally."

"Good. Sleep does not yet weigh down my eyelids."

"Loyal Heart is a friend of Blackbird," the chief continued, with some hesitation. The hunter smiled knowingly.

"Blackbird is one of the most renowned braves of the tribe," he answered; "his daughter, Bounding Fawn, will count fourteen autumns at the fall of the leaves."

"Black-deer loves Bounding Fawn."

"I know it; my brother has already confessed to me that the virgin of the first love placed, during his sleep, a four-leaved shamrock under his head. But has the chief assured himself as to Bounding Fawn's feelings?"

"The young virgin smiles when the chief returns from an expedition with scalps hanging from his girdle; she trembles when he departs; she feeds his horse in secret, and her greatest pleasure is to clean his weapons."

"Good! and does the maiden recognise the sound of my brother's war-whistle, and run joyfully to the meeting the chief grants her? To-night, for instance, were the chief to call her, would she rise?"

"She would rise," the chief answered, laconically.

"Good! Now, what does the chief wish to ask of me? Blackbird is rich."

"Black-deer will give six mares which have never felt a bit, two guns, and four hides of the white she-buffalo; to-morrow the chief's mother will give them to my brother."

"Good. And does my brother intend to carry off the woman he loves this night?"

"Black-deer suffers from being so long separated from her; since the death of his well-beloved wife, Singing-bird, the chief's calli is solitary. Bounding Fawn will prepare the venison for the chief; what does my brother think of it?"

"My horse is ready; if my brother say yes, I will accompany him, if it be that he desires, as I suppose."

"Loyal Heart knows everything; nothing escapes his discernment."

"Let us go without loss of time. Will you accompany us, Tranquil? two witnesses are required."

"I wish for nothing better, if my presence be not disagreeable to the chief."

"On the contrary; the pale hunter is a great brave. I shall be pleased to know that he is by my side."

The three men rose and quitted the house. Nô Eusebio raised his head.

"We shall return in an hour," Loyal Heart said.

The old servant made no objection, and fell back in his hammock. The chief's horse was tied up near the rancho; he leaped into the saddle and waited for the two hunters, who had gone to fetch theirs from the corral. In a few minutes they arrived. The three men slowly traversed the village, whose streets were completely deserted at this late hour of the night. At times, however, dogs got up as they passed, and barked furiously after their horses' heels. Like all the winter villages, this one was carefully guarded. Numerous sentries, placed at different points, watched over the common safety; but they did not challenge, but allowed them to pass apparently unnoticed.

After leaving the village, Black-deer, who rode in front, made a sharp turn to the right, and the horsemen almost immediately disappeared in a thick chapparal, where men and horses concealed themselves with the utmost care. The night was magnificent, the sky studded with a profusion of glistening stars; the moon shed a pale and soft light, which, owing to the purity of the atmosphere, allowed objects to be distinguished for a great distance. A solemn silence brooded over the forest, and a gentle breeze sighed through the tree-tops.

Black-deer advanced to the edge of the covert, and, raising his fingers to his lips, imitated the cry of the raven thrice with such perfection, that the two hunters concealed in the rear looked up mechanically to discover the bird that uttered the note. A few minutes after, the cry of the blue-jay, borne on the breeze, expressed like a

plaintive sigh on the ears of the attentive hunters. Black-deer repeated his signal. This time the note of the sparrow-hawk was mingled almost instantaneously with that of the jay. The Indian started, and looked in the direction where his friends were concealed.

"Is my brother ready?" he said.

"I am," Loyal Heart simply answered.

Almost immediately, four riders could be seen leaving the village at a gallop, and advancing rapidly toward the spot where the chief stood motionless. The rider who galloped at the head of the band was a woman; she made her horse bound with feverish impatience, and compelled it to gallop in a straight line, clearing all the obstacles that were in its way. The three other riders were about a bow-shot behind her. Bounding Fawn, for it was she, fell panting into Black-deer's arms.

"Here I am! here I am!" she cried in a joyous voice.

The Indian pressed her lovingly to his wide chest, and lifting her from the ground with that irresistible strength that passion produces, he leaped with her on to his horse, into whose flank he dug his spurs, and started at full speed in the direction of the desert. At the same moment the horsemen arrived, uttering yells of anger, and brandishing their weapons.

"Stay, Blackbird," Loyal Heart shouted; "your daughter belongs to my brother. Black-deer is a great chief, his calli is lined with scalps—he is rich in horses, arms, and furs; Bounding Fawn will be the *cihuatl* of a great brave, whose medicine is powerful."

"Does Black-deer mean, then, to carry off my daughter?" Blackbird asked.

"He does mean it, and we his friends will defend him. Your daughter pleases him, and he will take her as his wife."

"Wah!" the Indian said, turning to the horsemen who accompanied him, "my brothers have heard."

"We have heard," the red-skins answered; "we say that Black-deer is truly a great chief, and since he is powerful enough to seize the woman he loves, he ought to keep her."

"My brothers have spoken well," Loyal Heart remarked. "To-morrow I will come to Blackbird's calli and pay him the purchase-money for the maiden."

"Good! To-morrow I shall expect Loyal Heart and his friend, the other pale-face warrior," Blackbird said.

After these remarks the three Indian warriors returned to the village, followed by the two hunters. As for Black-deer, he had buried himself with his booty in the thickest part of the forest. The preliminaries of a Comanche marriage had been strictly carried out.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MARRIAGE.

WHEN the two hunters returned to the rancho, Tranquil looked at Loyal Heart.

"Well," he said, "and what are you going to do?"

"Well," the other replied with a smile, "the same as you are going to do yourself, I suppose, sleep—for it is close on two o'clock." But noticing the Canadian's anxious air, he hurriedly added—"Pardon me, friend, I forget that you have made a long journey to find me here, and that, probably, you have important matters to communicate to me. Well, if you do not feel too fatigued, I will rekindle the fire, we will

sit down by the brasero, and I will listen to you ; I do not feel at all disposed for sleep, and the present hour is admirably adapted for confidence."

Tranquil gently shook his head.

"I thank you for your kindness, my friend," he said ; "but, on reflection, I prefer deferring the conversation till to-morrow."

"You know better than I do the conduct best suited to you under the circumstances. I merely repeat that I am quite at your service whatever you please to do."

"Let us sleep," the Canadian answered. "To-morrow, after our visit to Black-bird, we will talk."

"Be it so, my friend, I will not press you ; here is your bed," he added, pointing to the pile of furs.

"It is rare for me to have so good a one in the desert," said Tranquil.

The two men then lay down fraternally side by side, placed their weapons within reach, and ere long the calmness of their breathing indicated that they were asleep. Nothing disturbed the repose they enjoyed, and the night passed quietly. A few minutes before sunrise Loyal Heart awoke, as did Tranquil ; a feeble light was beginning to penetrate into the rancho, through the windows.

"Ah, ah !" Loyal Heart said, "you are a very light sleeper, my friend."

"It is an old hunter's habit, which I think I should find it difficult to get rid of."

"I believe we have something more important to attend to."

"We have to perform the commission Black-deer entrusted to us ; are you still of a mind to help me ?"

"Certainly : the chiefs of the tribe received me with too much courtesy for me not to eagerly take the first opportunity that offers to testify the lively sympathy I feel."

"Well, as it is so, go to your comrades, get ready to mount, and wait for me ; I shall join them directly."

"All right," Tranquil answered.

The two men left the house ; Nô Eusebio had deserted his hammock, and was probably attending to household duties. The Canadian went straight to the calli lent his comrades by the Indians.

Day had by this time entirely broken ; the curtains of the callis were raised one after the other, and the Indian squaws were beginning to emerge to go in quest of wood and water. Small parties of warriors were going off in different directions, some to indulge in the pleasures of the chase, others to beat the forest and be certain that there was no enemy's trail in the vicinity of the village.

At the moment when the Canadian passed in front of the medicine-lodge, the sorcerer of the tribe came out of it. He held in his hand a calabash filled with water, in which a bunch of wormwood was dipped. The sorcerer ascended to the roof of the medicine-lodge, and turned to the rising sun. At the same instant the hachesto shouted three different times in a powerful voice, "The sun ! the sun ! the sun !"

When the sorcerer had disappeared in the medicine-lodge, the hunter resumed his walk. The inhabitants of the village already affected to regard him as one of themselves ; the women saluted him with a smile and a pleasant word as he passed, and the children ran up laughing to bid him good-day. When Tranquil entered the calli his comrades were still asleep, but he soon roused them.

"Hilloh !" John Davis said, good-humouredly, "you are very early, old hunter. Are we going to make any expedition ?"

"Not that I know of, for the present, at any rate," the Canadian said ; "we are merely going to accompany Loyal Heart, while he accomplishes a ceremony."

"What is up, then ?"

"The marriage of our friend the Black-deer. I supposed it to be good policy not to refuse our aid, especially as you, Davis, have an interest in getting into the good graces of the Indians."

"I should think so. But tell me, have you consulted with our friend on the matter that brings me here?"

"Not yet: various reasons urged me to wait for a favourable moment."

"As you please; but you know the matter is pressing."

"I know it, and you can trust to me."

"Oh! I leave you to act entirely as you please. What are we to do now?"

"Nothing but mount our horses, and wait till Loyal Heart comes to fetch us. He has undertaken the management of the ceremony."

"Well, that is not very difficult," the American said.

In an instant the hunters were up, performed their ablutions, and saddled their horses. They had scarce mounted, ere a great noise of shells, drums, and chichikouès, mingled with shouts of joy, shots, and the sharp barking of all the dogs in the village, announced the arrival of Loyal Heart. The young chief advanced at the head of a numerous procession of Indian warriors, dressed in their most magnificent costumes, armed and painted for war, and mounted on superb mustangs, which they caused to curvet with marks of the most lively delight. The procession halted before the calli.

"Well," Loyal Heart asked, "are you ready?"

"We are waiting for you," Tranquil answered.

"Come on, then."

The five hunters placed themselves by the side of their friend, and the procession started once more.

Loyal Heart proceeded straight to Blackbird's calli, in front of which a fire had been lighted, and the chief's family were seated silent and motionless round it. Blackbird, dressed in his grand war-paint, and mounted on his battle-charger, rode at the head of some twenty warriors of his family, whom it was easy to recognise as renowned warriors and great braves by the numerous wolf-tails with which their heels were adorned. At the moment when the procession reached the great square, a solitary horseman, with a gloomy air and haughty demeanour, was crossing it, and proceeding toward the council-lodge. It was Blue-fox. Tranquil whispered to Loyal Heart—

"Be on your guard against that man; if I am not greatly mistaken, his mission is only a trap, and he meditates some treachery."

"That is my notion too," the hunter replied; "that gloomy face forebodes no good."

"I have known him for a long time, he is a villain. I would not let him out of my sight, were I in your place. But we have reached our destination."

Loyal Heart raised his arm; at this signal the music, if such a name can be given to the abominable row made by all these instruments, which, held by unskilful hands, produced the most discordant sounds, was silent. The warriors then seized their war-whistles, and produced a shrill and prolonged note thrice. A similar whistle was immediately given by Blackbird's party. When the procession halted, a vacant space of about twenty yards was left between the two bands, and Loyal Heart and Tranquil advanced alone into this space, making their horses prance and brandishing their weapons, amid the joyous applause of the crowd. Blackbird and two of his comrades then left their party and rode to meet the hunters. Loyal Heart, after saluting the chief respectfully, was the first to speak.

"I see that my father is a great chief," he said; "his head is covered by the sacred feathered cap of the band of the old dogs; numerous exploits are painted on his broad chest; the wolf-tails fastened to his heels make a hole in the ground, so many are they. My father must be one of the greatest braves of the Antelope Comanches: he will tell us his name, that I may remember it as that of a chief of renown in the council, and brave and terrible in combat."

The chief smiled proudly, bowed, and answered—

"My son is young, and yet wisdom dwells in him; his arm is strong in fight, and his tongue is not forked; his renown has reached me; my brothers call him Loyal Heart. Blackbird is happy to see him. What motive brings Loyal Heart to Blackbird with so large a party, when the heart of the chief is sad, and a cloud has spread over his mind?"

"I know," Loyal Heart answered, "that the chief is sad, and am aware of the motive of his grief. I have come with the braves who accompany me to restore tranquillity to the mind of the chief."

"My son Loyal Heart will explain himself without delay; he knows that a man of heart never plays with the grief of an aged man."

"I know it and will explain myself without further delay. My father is rich, the Wacondah has always regarded him with a favourable eye; his family is numerous, his sons are already brave warriors, his daughters are virtuous and lovely; one of them, the fairest, was violently carried off last night by Black-deer."

"Yes," the chief answered, "a Comanche warrior bore away my daughter Bounding Fawn."

"That warrior is Black-deer."

"Black-deer is one of the most celebrated warriors and wisest chiefs of my nation. My heart leaped toward him. Why did he carry off my child?"

"Because Black-deer loves Bounding Fawn; a great brave has the right to take anywhere the wife who pleases him, if he is rich enough to pay her father."

"If such be Black-deer's intention, if he offer me a ransom such as a warrior like him ought to pay to a chief like myself, I will allow that he has acted in an honourable way; if not, I shall be an implacable enemy to him, because he will have betrayed my confidence."

"Blackbird must not hastily judge his friend; I am ordered by Black-deer to pay for Bounding Fawn such a ransom as few chiefs have ever before received."

"What is the ransom? where is it?"

"The warriors who accompany me have brought it with them; but before delivering it to my father, I will remark that he has not invited me to sit down by his fire, or offered me the calumet."

"My son will sit down by my fire, and I will share the calumet with him when his mission is finished."

"Be it so; my father shall be satisfied."

Loyal Heart, turning to the warriors, who during this conversation, which was sternly demanded by the laws of Indian etiquette, had stood silent and motionless, raised his hand. At once several horsemen left the procession and pranced up to him, brandishing their weapons.

"The ransom!" he merely said.

"One moment," Blackbird objected; "of what does this ransom consist?"

"You shall see," Loyal Heart replied.

"I know that, but should prefer being informed beforehand."

"For what reason?"

"Wah! that I may be in a position to refuse it if I find it unworthy of you."

"You ought not to have such a fear."

"That is possible, still I adhere to what I said."

"As you please," said Loyal Heart.

Blackbird was an Indian of the old school, gifted with a smart dose of avarice. The worthy chief was not sorry, before pledging his word, to know what he had to depend on, and if he would make as good a bargain as was stated. This is why he had insisted on the objects comprising the ransom being shown him. Loyal Heart was perfectly acquainted with his man, and hence was not much affected by his demand; he merely ordered the bearers of the ransom to approach.

This ransom had been prepared for a long period by Black-deer, and was really magnificent; it consisted of four mares in foal, four others which had never bred, a three-year-old charger, a mustang with slim legs and flashing eye, four muskets, each with twelve charges of powder; and four white female-buffalo hides. As the several articles were presented to the old chief, his eye dilated under the influence of joy, and flashed with a wild lustre. He required to make extraordinary efforts to preserve the decorum necessary under such circumstances. When all the presents had been given and placed by him under the immediate guard of his relatives and friends, Loyal Heart spoke again.

"Is my father satisfied?" he asked him.

"Wah!" the old chief cried. "My son, Black-deer, is a brave; he did right to carry off Bounding Fawn."

"Will my father bear witness to that?" the hunter pressed him.

"This very moment," the chief answered eagerly, "and before all the warriors here present."

"Let my father do so, then, that all may know that Black-deer is no false-tongued thief."

"I will do so," Blackbird answered.

"Good! my father will follow us."

"I will follow you."

Blackbird then placed himself at the right of Loyal Heart; the band of warriors who accompanied him joined the procession, and all proceeded toward the ark of the first man, at the foot of which the hachesto was standing, holding in his hand the totem of the tribe. The sorcerer was standing in front of the totem, having on either side of him two sachems chosen from among the wisest of the nation.

"What do you want here?" the sorcerer asked.

"We demand justice," the hunter replied.

"Speak! we will give you that justice, whatever the consequences may be," the sorcerer said. "Speak; my ears are open."

"We wish that justice should be done to a warrior, whose reputation attempts have been made to varnish."

"Who is the warrior?"

"Black-deer."

"What has he done?"

"Last night he carried off Bounding Fawn, the daughter of Blackbird here present."

"Good! has he paid a fine ransom?"

"Let Blackbird himself answer."

"Yes," the old chief here said, "I will answer. Black-deer has paid a noble ransom."

"In that case," said the sorcerer, "my son is satisfied?"

"I am satisfied."

There was a momentary silence, after which the sorcerer spoke.

"Black-deer is a great warrior," he said in a loud voice. "I, the medicine-man, standing beneath the totem of the tribe, declare that he has employed the right all renowned warriors possess of seizing their property wherever they may find it. From this moment Bounding Fawn is the squaw of Black-deer, to prepare his food, clean his weapons, carry his burdens, and take care of his war-chargers, and whoever says the contrary speaks falsely! Black-deer has the right to convey Bounding Fawn to his calli, and no one can prevent it; he is empowered, if she deceive him, to cut off her nose and ears. Blackbird will give two female-buffalo hides to be hung up in the great medicine-lodge."

At this final clause, known beforehand, however—for everything is strictly regulated

by the code of etiquette in the matter of marriage—Blackbird made a frightful grimace. It seemed to him hard to part with two of the hides he had received but a few moments previously. But Loyal Heart came to his assistance, and interposed in a way that brought the smile back to his lips.

"Black-deer," he said in a loud voice, "loves Bounding Fawn, and will only owe her to himself—he alone will pay the tribute to the Wacondah; four female-buffalo hides will be given to the medicine-lodge."

He made a sign, and a warrior advanced, bearing the hides across his horse's neck. Loyal Heart took them and offered them to the sorcerer.

"My father will receive these skins," he said; "he will make such use of them as will be most agreeable to the Master of Life."

At this unexpected generosity, the audience burst into shouts of frenzied joy. The shells, drums, and chickekouës recommenced their infernal noise, and the procession set out again for Blackbird's calli. The old chief knew too well what he owed to himself, and the son-in-law he had just accepted, not to behave with proper decorum. When the procession reached the calli, he said, in a loud voice—

"My brothers and friends, deign to honour with your presence the marriage banquet, and I shall be happy to see you. My son Black-deer will come, I am sure, to give the feast that appearance which it ought to have."

He had scarce uttered the words, when a great noise was heard. The crowd parted violently, and in the space left free a horseman appeared, galloping at full speed: he held a woman on his horse's neck with one hand, while with the other he led a filly. At the sight of the horseman, the shouts and applause were redoubled, for everybody had recognised Black-deer. On reaching the calli he leapt to the ground without uttering a syllable; then he drew his scalping-knife and buried it in the neck of the filly. The poor brute gave a plaintive whining, trembled violently, and sank to the ground. The chief then turned it on its back, ripped open its chest, and tearing out the still quivering heart, he touched Bounding Fawn's forehead with it, while shouting in a loud voice—

"This is my squaw; woe to the man who touches her."

"I am his," the young wife then said.

All now dismounted, and the marriage-feast began. The white men, who were not very eager to eat their portion of this Indian meal, composed in great measure of dog, boiled milk, and horse's flesh, had drawn on one side and tried to escape unnoticed, but Blackbird and Black-deer watched them, and cut off their retreat; hence they were compelled, whether they liked it or no, to sit down to the banquet.

Tranquil, Loyal Heart, and their comrades made up their minds to the worst, and ate, or pretended to eat, with as good an appetite as the rest of the guests. The repast was prolonged till late in the day; for, though the Comanches do not drink spirits, still they are extraordinarily voracious, and eat till they can swallow no more.

The whites had hard work in declining those provisions, of more or less suspicious appearance, which were constantly offered to them. Still, thanks to their thorough knowledge of Indian habits, they managed to escape the greater part of the infliction and see out the truly Homeric banquet without much annoyance. At the moment when Loyal Heart and Tranquil rose to retire, Black-deer approached them.

"Where are my brothers going?" he asked.

"To my calli," Loyal Heart replied.

"Good! Black-deer will join them there soon: he has to speak with his brothers on serious matters."

"Let my brother remain with his friends, to-morrow will be time enough."

The chief frowned.

"My brother Loyal Heart must be careful," he said; "I have to consult with him on matters of gravity."

The hunter, struck by the chief's anxious air, looked at him with alarm.

"What is the matter?" he asked him.

"My brother will know in an hour."

"Very good, chief; I will await you in my calli."

"Black-deer will come there."

The chief then withdrew, laying his finger on his lip, and the hunters went off deep in thought.

CHAPTER X.

RETURN TO LIFE.

WE are now compelled to go a little way back, and return to one of the principal actors in our story, whom we have too long neglected; we allude to the White Scalper.

Quoniam had been in too great a hurry in telling the Canadian of the death of his enemy; it is true, though, that the negro acted in good faith, and really believed he had killed him. The last dagger-stab dealt by Quoniam was buried deep in the old man's chest; the wound was so serious that the Scalper immediately left off further resistance; his eyes closed, his nerves relaxed like broken springs; he loosed hold of his enemy, to whom he had hitherto clung, and remained an inert mass, tossed at the mercy of the waves.

The negro, exhausted with fatigue and half suffocated, hastened back to the deck of the vessel, persuaded that his enemy was dead; but it was not so. The Scalper had merely lost his senses, and his inanimate body was picked up by a Mexican boat. But, when this boat reached the shore, the crew, on seeing the horrible wounds which covered the stranger's body, his pallor and corpse-like immobility, had, in their turn, fancied him dead, and taking no further trouble about him, threw him back into the sea. Fortunately for the Scalper, at the moment when the crew formed this determination the boat was close to land, so that his body, supported by the waves, was gently deposited on the sand, the lower part only remaining submerged, while the head and chest were left dry by the retirement of the waves.

Either through the fresh night-air or the movement the sea imparted to the lower part of his body, within an hour the old man gave a slight start; a sigh heaved his powerful chest, and a few instinctive attempts to change his position clearly showed that this vigorous organisation was struggling energetically against death. At length the wounded man opened his eyes, but profound gloom still enveloped him like a winding sheet. On the other hand, the fatigue produced by the gigantic struggle he had sustained, and the enormous quantity of blood which had escaped through his wounds, caused him a general weakness, so great, both morally and physically, that it was impossible for the Scalper to remember the circumstances that had brought him there.

It was in vain that he tried to restore order in his ideas, or bring back his fugitive thoughts; the shock had been too rude; the commotion too strong; in spite of all his efforts he could not succeed in refastening the broken thread of his thoughts. He saw himself alone, wounded, and abandoned on the sea-shore; he understood instinctively all the horror and desperation of his position; but no gleam of intelligence flashed across his brain to guide him in this fearful chaos.

Then took place on that desolate shore a horrible drama, filled with moving and startling incidents—the wild struggles of a half-dead man striving to reconquer the existence which was ebbing from him, and struggling with savage energy against death. The slightest movement the Scalper attempted occasioned him unheard-of sufferings, not only through the numerous wounds, whose lips were filled with sand and gravel, but also because he was compelled to confess to himself that all his efforts would lead to no result, except a miracle happened.

That miracle, which the wretch did not hope for, the very thought of which could not occur to him, Providence, whose ways are impenetrable, and who often only appears to save a guilty man to inflict on him a more terrible chastisement, was preparing to perform at the moment when the wounded man, his strength and energy exhausted, was falling back conquered on the beach, resolved to await that death which he could not avoid.

The Texans had scattered along the beach several parties of freebooters, who were intended to watch the movements of the Mexican cruisers. These parties were all within hail of each other, and able to assemble at a given point with extreme rapidity. Chance willed it that when the Scalper's body was again thrown into the sea it touched shore not far from a large rancho standing close to the beach, and in which the most influential chiefs of the Texan army were assembled, in prevision of the great events that were preparing. Naturally the approaches to the rancho were carefully guarded, and numerous patrols marched around it.

One of these patrols had seen the Mexican boats land, and hurried up to drive them off, which they easily effected, as the Mexicans were not at all desirous to begin a fresh fight with enemies whose number and strength they were not acquainted with. When the boats got out to sea again, the Texans began carefully examining the beach, in order to be certain that all their enemies had retired. The first to discover the Scalper's body summoned his comrades, and soon the wounded man had twenty individuals round him. At the first moment they fancied him dead; the Scalper heard all that was said around him, but was unable to make a move or utter a word. He felt terribly alarmed for a moment; it was when a freebooter, after bending over and carefully examining him, rose again with the careless remark:

"The poor devil is dead, we have nothing to do but dig a hole in the sand and put him in it, so that the coyotes and vultures may not devour his corpse."

At this sentence, pronounced in a perfectly calm and careless voice, as if it were the simplest and most natural thing in the world, the Scalper felt a cold perspiration beading at the roots of his hair, and a shudder of terror ran over his body. He made a tremendous effort to speak or shriek, but it was in vain.

"Stay," said another adventurer interposing, "let us not be in such a hurry. This poor wretch is a creature made after God's own image; although he is in a pitiable state, a breath of life may still be left in him. We shall still be in a position to bury him if we find that he is really dead; but first let us assure ourselves that any assistance is in vain."

"Nonsense," the first speaker continued; "Fray Antonio is always like that; were we to listen to him, all the dead would only be wounded. However, as there is nothing to hurry us at this moment, I ask no better than to try and bring this man round, although he appears to me as dead as a fellow can well be."

"No matter," Fray Antonio answered, "let us try."

"Very good," said the other with a shrug.

"And first let us remove him from here. When he runs no further risk of being carried off by the waves, we will see."

The wounded man was immediately picked up by four freebooters, and gently

carried some twenty yards off to an entirely dry spot, where it was impossible for the sea to reach him. The worthy monk then produced a large case-bottle of rum, which he uncorked, and after explaining his duty to each, that is to say, after ordering that the temples, wrists, and pit of the stomach should be vigorously rubbed with rum, he bent over him, and opening his jaws, which were tight as a vice, with the blade of his dagger, he poured into his mouth an honest quartern of rum. The effect of this double treatment was not long delayed. The wounded man gave a slight start, opened his eyes feebly, and gave vent to a sigh of relief.

"Ah, ah," said Antonio; "what do you think of that, Ruperto? I fancy your dead man is coming to life."

"On my word, it is true," the other answered; "well, that is a man who can flatter himself with having his soul screwed into his body; by Bacchus! if he comes back, he can say that he has made a perilous long journey."

In the meantime, the friction was continued with the same vigour; the circulation of the blood was rapidly re-established; the Scalper's eyes became less haggard, and his features were relaxed.

"Do you feel better?" the monk asked him kindly.

"Yes," he answered in a weak voice.

"All the better. With the help of Heaven we will get you out of the scrape."

By a singular accident, the monk had not yet recognised the man to whom he had himself owed his life a few months previously. The wounds were carefully washed with rum and water, and cleared from sand and gravel; they were then poulticed with pounded oregano leaves, and then carefully tied up.

"There," the monk continued with an air of satisfaction, "that is finished. I will now have you carried to a spot where you will be much better able than here to enjoy that repose which is indispensable."

"Do what you please with me," the wounded man answered. "I owe you too much to offer any objection."

"The more so," Ruperto answered with a laugh, "because it would be useless; the reverend father has undertaken your cure, and you must follow his prescriptions."

At a sign from Fray Antonio, four powerful men raised the patient in their arms, and carried him into the rancho. It was he whom Colonel Melendez had seen go in. The rancho belonged to a rich Texan hacendero, a devoted partizan of the revolution, and who was delighted to place at the disposal of the chiefs a retreat which he had built in happier times for a summer villa.

The chiefs were at first rather annoyed at the free-and-easy way in which Fray Antonio, without giving them notice, had encumbered them with a wounded stranger. But when they saw in what a pitiable state the poor fellow was, they allowed the monk to instal him where he thought best. Fray Antonio did not allow the permission to be repeated. Aided by the master of the rancho, he transported the wounded man to a spacious and airy room, whose windows looked out on the sea.

So soon as the patient was laid in bed, the monk handed him a narcotic drink, which he requested him to swallow. The effect was almost immediate; a few minutes after he had drunk it, White Scalper fell into a calm and restorative sleep.

Several days passed thus, during which Fray Antonio paid him the closest and most affectionate attention. If, at the first moment, the monk was unable to recognise the White Scalper, it was not long ere he did so by daylight; after carefully examining this man, whose appearance had really something strange and remarkable about it, his recollection returned, and he recognised the hunter so greatly feared on the prairie by the red-skins, and even by the whites, and to whom himself owed his life under such singular circumstances; hence he was pleased at the opportunity chance afforded him of repaying his debt to this man.

Things went on thus till the day of the battle of Cerro Pardo. In the morning, as

usual, Fray Antonio entered his patient's room, whose cure was rapidly advancing, thanks to the efficacy of the oregano leaves. His wounds were almost cicatrised, and he felt his strength returning.

"My friend," said the monk to him, "I have done all for you I morally could."

"I have only thanks to offer you," the wounded man said, stretching out his hand.

"Much obliged," said Fray Antonio, as he took this hand; "to-day I have bad news for you."

"Bad news?" the other repeated in surprise.

"After all," the monk continued, "the news may be good. Still, frankly, I do not believe it."

"I must confess that I do not at all understand you, so I should feel extremely obliged if you would explain."

"That is true. Indeed, you cannot suspect anything. In two words, this is the affair; the army has received orders to march this very morning."

"So that—?" the wounded man asked.

"I am, to my great regret," the monk said with a crafty smile, "compelled to leave you behind."

"Hum!" the White Scalper muttered in some alarm.

"Unless," Fray Antonio continued, "as I dare not hope, we beat the Mexicans."

The patient seemed to grow more and more restless about the position in which he ran a risk of being left.

"Did you come solely to tell me that?" he asked.

"No. I wished to make you a proposal."

"What is it?" the other eagerly asked.

"Listen. I picked you up in a most desperate state."

"That is true; I allow it."

"Although some people say," Fray Antonio continued, "that you received your wounds in fighting against us, and, indeed, some of our men declare themselves certain of the fact, I would not put faith in their words. This is what I propose: about one hundred miles from the spot where we now are, there is an encampment of white men and half-breeds, over whom I possessed considerable influence some time back. I believe that they have not yet quite forgotten me, and that any one joining them as from me, would meet with a kindly reception. Will you go there?"

"How could I perform this journey in my present state of weakness and prostration?"

"That need not trouble you. Four men, who are devoted to me, will conduct you to my old friends."

"Oh, if that be the case," the Scalper exclaimed eagerly, "I gladly accept, even if I perish on the road."

"I trust that you will not perish, but reach your destination all right. So that is agreed. You will go?"

"With the greatest pleasure. When do we start?"

"At once, there is not a moment to lose."

"Good! give the necessary orders, I am ready."

"I must warn you, however, that the men to whom I am sending you are slightly of a scampish nature."

"What does it concern me? if they were even pirates of the prairies, I should attach no importance to the fact."

"Bravo! I see that we understand each other, for I believe these gentlemen dabble a little in all trades."

"Good, good!" the Scalper gaily answered; "do not trouble yourself about that."

"In that case, get ready to start; I shall return in ten minutes at the latest."

With these words, the monk left the room. The old man, who had not many preparations to make, was soon in a position to take the road. As he had stated, within ten minutes the monk returned, followed by four men. Among them was Ruperto, who, it will be remembered, offered the advice to bury the wounded man in the sand. The Scalper was still very weak, and incapable of either walking or sitting a horse. The monk had remedied this inconvenience, as far as possible, by having a clumsy litter prepared for the wounded man, carried by two mules, and in which he could recline. This mode of transport was very slow, and extremely inconvenient, especially for the guides, in a country such as they had to cross; but it was the only one practicable at the moment, and so they must put up with it.

"And now," said the monk, "may Heaven direct you: do not feel at all alarmed, Ruperto has my instructions, and I know him well enough to be convinced that he will not depart from them. Good-bye!"

And, after giving the wounded man his hand, Fray Antonio made a movement to retire.

"One moment," said the old man, as he held the hand he had taken; "I wish to say but one word to you."

"Speak, but be brief. I have the weightiest reasons for desiring your immediate departure; in a few minutes some wounded men will arrive here, who have hitherto been kept in the fort, and whom you would probably not be at all pleased to meet."

"I fancy I can understand to whom you allude; but that is not the question. I wish, before parting with you, and not knowing whether I shall ever see you again, to express to you the gratitude I feel for your conduct toward me, a gratitude which is greater because I am convinced you have recognised me."

"And suppose I have?"

"You needed only to say one word to surrender me to my most inveterate enemies."

"Even supposing, as you seem to believe, that I have recognised you, I was only discharging a debt."

The old man's face writhed; his eye became moist; he warmly squeezed the monk's hand, which he had till then held in his own, and added—

"Thanks. This kindness will not be lost; the events of the last few days have greatly modified my way of thinking; you shall never regret having saved my life."

"I hope so; but be gone, and may Heaven guard you!"

"We shall meet again."

"Who knows?" the monk muttered.

The guides flogged their mules, and the litter began moving. About an hour after the start, it met a covered cart, in which lay Tranquil, but they passed without seeing each other. The monk had only spoken the truth about Ruperto. The worthy adventurer was most attentive to the sick man, carefully watching over him, and trying to while away the tedium of the journey.

Ruperto, to fatigue the patient as little as possible, only travelled by night, or very early in the morning, ere the sun had acquired its full strength. They marched thus for a fortnight, during which the country grew wilder, and the ground gradually ascended; the scenery became more abrupt and stern, the virgin forests closed in, and they could see that they were approaching the mountains.

One evening, when the little party had established their night bivouac on the banks of a rapid stream that flowed into the Arkansas, the Scalper, who, in spite of the privations and fatigue to which he had been constantly exposed since his departure from the rancho, felt his strength gradually returning, asked his guide how many days their journey would still last. At this question, Ruperto smiled cunningly.

"Our journey has been finished four days," he said.

"What do you mean?" the Scalper asked.

"The people we are going to see," the adventurer went on, "do not like to receive visits without being previously advised; surprises do not agree with them. In order to avoid any misunderstanding, which is always to be regretted between old friends, I employed the only means in my power."

"And what is it?"

"Oh, it is very simple. Just look at our camp—do people guard themselves in this way on the desert? Instead of being at the top of a hill, we are at the watering-place of wild beasts; the smoke from our fire, instead of being concealed, is visible for a great distance. Do all these acts teach you nothing?"

"Ah, ah," the old man said, "then you wish your friends to surprise us?"

"Quite right. In that way the recognition will be effected without striking a blow. And stay! if I am not mistaken, we are about to receive visitors."

At this moment the branches of a neighbouring thicket were roughly parted, and several men rushed into the camp, rifle in hand.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PIRATES OF THE PRAIRIES.

THE White Scalper gave an imperceptible start at the unexpected apparition of the strangers; but he had sufficient power over himself apparently to preserve that coolness and stoicism which the red-skins and wood-rangers make a point of honour. He did not alter the careless attitude he was in, though he examined the new comers attentively.

They were at least twenty in number, for they had risen from all sides at once, and in a twinkling surrounded the travellers. These men, mostly clad in the trapper's hunting-shirt and fox-skin cap, had a vigorous appearance, and a ferocious look, not at all adapted to inspire confidence; they were armed to the teeth, not only having the rifle and machete, but also the scalping-knife and tomahawk employed by the Indians.

The man who appeared to be their chief was at the most thirty-five years of age, tall, well-built, and proportioned; his wide forehead, black eyes, Grecian nose, and large mouth, made up a face pleasing at the first glance, though on examining it more closely, you soon perceived that his glance was false, and that a sardonic smile constantly played round his thin and pale lips. His face was framed in by thick black curls, which fell in disorder on his shoulders and mixed with a large beard, which the fatigues of a wandering and adventurous life were beginning to silver at places.

The four Texan adventurers had not made a move; the chief of the strangers looked at them for a moment with his hands crossed on his rifle-barrel, the butt of which rested on the ground.

At length, by a movement that was familiar to him, he threw back his curls, and exclaimed—

"Halloh, Ruperto," he said, "you here? what has brought you into our parts?"

"I wish to see you," the other answered, as he carelessly struck a light for his cigarette.

"Nonsense! only that?" the stranger continued.

"What other motive could I have, Master Sandova?"

"Who knows?" the other said, "life has such strange changes."

"This time you are mistaken. Nothing disagreeable forces me to pay you a visit."

"That is more and more extraordinary. Then, you have come on your own accord?"

"I do not say that, for my visit necessarily has a motive. Still, it is not at all of the nature you suppose."

"Canarios! I am glad to see that I am not so far from the truth as it appeared at first."

"All the better!"

"But why did not you come straight to our encampment, if you were seeking us, as you say?"

"That would have been a fine idea, to be welcomed with a shower of slugs! No, I think I acted more wisely as I have."

"We have been on your trail for three days."

"Why did you not show yourselves sooner?"

"I was not quite certain it was you."

"Well, that is possible. Will you not sit down?"

"What for? now that we have met, I hope you will come to our camp?"

"I did not like to propose it; you see we are not alone, but have a stranger with us."

"The friends of our friends are ours, and have a claim to our attention."

"I thank you, caballero," the Scalper replied with a bow; "I trust you will have no cause to repent having offered me hospitality."

"The company in which I find you is an excellent guarantee to me, senor," the adventurer continued.

"Do you intend to lead us to your camp to-night?" Ruperto asked.

"Why not? we are not more than fifteen miles from it at the most."

"That is true; but this caballero is wounded, and so long a distance after a fatiguing day——"

"Oh, I feel very well, I assure you. My strength has almost entirely returned; I even believe that, were it absolutely necessary, I could sit a horse," the old man said.

"As it is so, we will start whenever you like."

"All right," said Sandoval; "however, I will undertake to lead you by a road which will shorten your distance one half."

All being thus arranged, the horses were saddled afresh, and they started. The strangers were on foot; the Scalper would not enter the litter, and even insisted on it being left behind, declaring that he did not want it, and cutting a rather long branch, he converted it into a staff.

Sandoval, as we have said, was the chief of the men who had so suddenly fallen on the bivouac of the adventurers. These men were pirates of the prairies. In a previous work we have described them.

Captain Sandoval's band of pirates was one of the most numerous and best organised in Upper Arkansas: his comrades, all thorough food for the gallows, formed the most magnificent collection of bandits that could be imagined. For a long period, Fray Antonio, if not forming part of the band, had taken part in its operations, and derived certain though illegal profit by supplying the captain with information about the passage of caravans, their strength, and the road they intended to follow. Although the worthy monk had given up this hazardous traffic, his conversion had not been of so old a date for the pirates to have completely forgotten the services he had rendered them; hence when he was compelled to abandon White Scalper he thought at once of his old friends. The idea occurred to him the more naturally,

because White Scalper, owing to the mode of life he had hitherto led in the desert, had in his character some points of resemblance with the pirates.

In the band of freebooters the monk had organised since his reformation were some men more beaten than the others by the tempest of an adventurous life. These men Fray Antonio had seen at work, and set their full value upon them; but he kept them near him, through a species of intuition, in order to have them under his hand if some day fate desired that he should be compelled to have recourse to an heroic remedy to get out of a scrape, which was easy to foresee when a man entered on the life of a partizan. Among these chosen comrades was naturally Ruperto; hence it was to him he entrusted the choice of three sure men to escort the wounded man to the camp of Captain Sandoval, in Upper Arkansas.

It has frequently been said that honest men always recognise each other at the first glance; but the statement is far truer when applied to rogues. The White Scalper and the pirate chief had not walked side by side for ten minutes ere the best possible understanding was arrived at between them. The captain admired as an amateur, and especially as a connoisseur, the athletic stature of his new companion. His rigid features which seemed carved in granite, for they were so firm and marked, his black and sparkling eyes, and even his blunt and sharp mode of speech, attracted and aroused his sympathy. Several times he proposed to have him carried on the shoulders of two of his most powerful comrades across awkward spots; but the old man constantly declined these kind offers, merely replying that physical pain was nothing, and that the man who could not conquer it by the strength of his will ought to be despised as an old woman.

There could be no reply to such a peremptory mode of reasoning, so Sandoval merely contented himself with nodding an assent. Night had fallen for some time, but it was a bright and starry night, which allowed them to march in safety, and have no fear of losing their way. After three hours of a very difficult journey, the travellers reached the crest of a high hill.

"We have arrived," Sandoval then said, as he stopped under the pretext of resting a moment, but in reality to give his companion an opportunity to draw breath.

"What, arrived?" said the Scalper, looking round him, but not perceiving the slightest sign of a camp.

In fact, the adventurers found themselves on a species of platform about fifteen hundred yards long, entirely denuded of trees save in the centre, where grew an immense live oak, more than sixty feet in circumference. Sandoval allowed his comrade to look around him for a moment, and then said, as he stretched out his arm to the giant tree—

"We are obliged to enter by the chimney. But once is not always, and you will not feel offended at it, when I tell you that I only do this to shorten our journey."

"You know that I do not at all understand you," the Scalper answered.

"I suspected it," Sandoval said with a smile. "But come along, and you will soon decipher the enigma."

The old man bowed without replying, and both walked toward the tree. On reaching the foot of the tree, Sandoval raised his head—

"Ohé!" he shouted, "are you there, Orson?"

"Where should I be if I was not?" a rough voice answered from the top of the tree. "I was obliged to wait for you here, as you have taken it into your head to wander about the whole night through."

The pirate burst into a laugh.

"Always amiable!" Sandoval continued; "it is astonishing how funny that animal of an Orson always is! Come, let down the ladder, you ugly brute!"

"Ugly brute, ugly brute!" the voice growled; "that is the way in which he thanks me."

In the meanwhile a long wooden ladder was let down through the branches Sandoval caught hold of it, secured it, and then turned to the wounded man—

"I will go first to show you the way."

"Do so," the Scalper said; "but I will be the second."

"Halloh!" the captain said, turning round, "why you are a Yankee."

"What does it matter to you?" the other said roughly.

"Not at all. Still, I am not sorry to know the fact."

"Well, you know it. What next?"

"Next?" Sandoval answered with a laugh; "you will be among countrymen, that is all."

"It makes little difference to me."

"How do you suppose it concerns me?" the captain said.

The wounded man followed him step for step. The ladder was resting against a platform about two yards in width, completely concealed in a mass of inextricable foliage. On this platform stood the giant to whom his chief had given the name of Orson.

"Any news?" the captain asked.

"None," the other answered laconically.

"Have all the detachments returned?"

"All except you."

"Are the Gazelle and the American girl in the grotto?"

"They are."

"That is well. When all the people have come up, you will remove the ladder and join us."

"All right. Caraï, I suppose I know what to do."

Sandoval contented himself with shrugging his shoulders.

"Come," he said to the Scalper, who was a silent witness of this scene.

They crossed the platform. The centre of the tree was entirely hollow, but it had not been rendered so by human agency; old age alone had converted the heart of the tree into dust, while the bark remained green and vigorous. The pirates, who had for many years inhabited a very large cave that ran under the hill, had one day seen the earth give way at a certain spot, after a storm; this was the way in which the chimney had been discovered.

The pirates, like all plundering animals, are very fond of having several issues to their lairs; this new one, supplied to them by accident, caused them the greater pleasure, because by the same occasion they obtained an observatory, whence they could survey an immense extent of country, which enabled them to see any enemy who might attempt to take them by surprise. A platform was formed at a certain height to keep the bark intact; and by means of two ladders, fitted one inside and one out, a communication was established.

Sandoval, in his heart, enjoyed his guest's surprise. In fact, the pirate's ingenious arrangement seemed marvellous to White Scalper.

"Now," he said to him, pointing to a second ladder, which descended to a great depth, "we will go down."

"At your service, at your service," the stranger answered. "It is really admirable."

They then began descending cautiously owing to the darkness, for the pirate placed as sentry on the *Mirador* had, either through forgetfulness or malice, neglected to bring torches, not supposing, as he said, that his comrades would return so late. White Scalper alone had followed the pirates by the strange road we have indicated. This road, very agreeable for foot-passengers, was, of course, completely impracticable for horsemen; hence Ruperto and his three comrades quitted Sandoval at the foot of the hill, making a long detour.

As the two men gradually descended, the light increased, and they seemed to be entering a furnace. On setting foot on the ground, the Scalper found himself in an immense cavern, lighted by a profusion of torches held by pirates, who, grouped at the foot of the ladder, seemed to find an honour in waiting the arrival of their chief, and offering him a grand reception. The grotto was of an enormous size; the spot where White Scalper found himself was a vast hall, whence radiated several galleries of immense length, and running in diametrically opposite directions. The scene that offered itself to the Scalper in this hall, where he arrived so unexpectedly, was worthy of Callot's pencil. Here could be seen strange faces, extraordinary costumes, impossible attitudes, all of which gave a peculiar character to this multitude of bandits, who were hailing their chief with shouts of joy.

Captain Sandoval knew too well the sort of people he had to deal with to be affected in any way by the reception his bandits had improvised for him; instead of appearing touched by their enthusiasm, he frowned.

"What is this, caballeros?" he said; "how comes it that you are all here waiting for me? *Viva Dios!* Some mistake must have occurred in the execution of my orders to make you collect so eagerly round me. Well, leave me, we will clear that up on another occasion, for the present I wish to be alone: begone!"

The bandits, without replying, bowed to the chief, and immediately withdrew, dispersing so promptly in the side galleries, that in less than five minutes the hall was entirely deserted. At the same moment Ruperto appeared. Sandoval offered his hand cordially to the adventurer, but it was the cordiality of a man who feels himself at home, which the Texan noticed.

"Halloh!" he said, "we are no longer on the prairie, it strikes me."

"No," the captain answered, seriously, "you are in my house; but," he added, with a pleasant smile, "that must not trouble you; you are my guests, and will be treated as you deserve."

"Good, good," Ruperto said, who would not let himself be imposed on by this cavalier manner, "I know where the shoe pinches, gossip. Well, I will find a remedy," and he turned to Orson; "beg White Gazelle to come hither; tell her particularly that Captain Sandoval wishes to see her."

The chief of the pirates smiled and offered his hand to Ruperto.

"Forgive me, Ruperto," he said to him, "but you know how I love that girl. When I am a single day without seeing her, I fancy that I want something."

"I am well aware of it," Ruperto answered, with a smile; "hence, you see, that to restore you to your right temper I did not hesitate to give Orson orders."

The captain sighed, but made no answer.

"Come," the adventurer continued gaily, "she will come, so recover your spirits. Caramba! it would be a fine thing for you to feel any longer vexed about a child who probably forgot to kiss you on your return because she was at play. Remember, we are your guests, that we have the claims which hospitality gives us, and that you must not look black at us."

"Alas, my friends," he answered, with a stifled sigh, "you know not, you cannot know, how sweet it is for a wretch like me to be able to say to himself there exists in the world a creature who loves him for himself."

"Silence," Ruperto said quickly, as he laid his hand on his arm, "*here she comes.*"

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE CAVERN.

RUPERTO was not mistaken: at this moment the most exquisite little creature imaginable came bounding up. It was a girl of twelve years of age at the most, fresh, smiling, and beautifully formed. Her long black hair, her rosy-lipped mouth, with its pearly teeth, her magnificent black hair floating into immense curls down to her knee, her eccentric costume, rather masculine than feminine, all concurred to give an imprint of strangeness, and render her fantastic, extraordinary, almost angelic, so striking a contrast did her lovely head appear to the vulgar and hideous bandits who surrounded her. So soon as the girl perceived the captain, a flash of delight shot from her eye, and with one bound she was in his arms.

"Ah," he said, as he kissed her silken curls, speaking in a soft voice, "here you are at last, my darling Gazelle, you have been long in coming."

"Father," she answered, as she repaid his caresses, "I was not aware of your return. It was late, I did not hope to see you to-night, so I was about to sleep."

"Well, Nina," he said, as he put her on the ground again and gave her a final kiss, "you must not remain here any longer. I have seen you, I have kissed you, and my stock of happiness is laid in till to-morrow. Go and sleep."

"Oh," she said, with a little shake of her charming head, "I no longer feel inclined for sleep; I can remain a few minutes longer with you, father."

White Scalper gazed with growing astonishment on this admirable child, so gay, so laughing, so loving, and who appeared so beloved. He could not account for her presence among the pirates, or the affection their captain testified for her.

"You love this child very dearly," he said, as he drew her gently towards him, and kissed her on the forehead.

She looked at him with widely-opened eyes, but did not evince the slightest fear.

"You ask if I love her," the pirate answered; "that child is the joy and happiness of our house. Do you think, then," he added, with some bitterness, "that because we are outlawed bandits we have stifled every generous feeling in our hearts? Undeceive yourself. The jaguar and panther love their cubs, the grizzly bear cherishes its whelps. Yes, we love our White Gazelle! She is our good genius, our guardian angel; so long as she remains among us we shall succeed in everything."

"Oh, in that case, father," she said eagerly, "you will always be fortunate, for I shall never leave you."

"Who can answer for the future?" he muttered in a choking voice.

"You are a happy father," the Scalper said, with a profound sigh.

"Yes, am I not? White Gazelle is not mine alone, she belongs to us all; she is our adopted daughter."

"Ah!" said the Scalper, letting his head drop sadly.

"Go, child," Sandoral exclaimed, "go and sleep, for night is drawing on."

The child withdrew, after saluting the three men with a soft glance, and soon disappeared in the depths of a side gallery. The captain looked after her so long as he could perceive her, then turning to his guests, he said—

"Follow me, seniors; it is growing late, you must be hungry, and need rest. The hospitality I am enabled to offer you will be modest, but frank and cordial."

The two men bowed and followed him into a gallery, on each side of which were

cells enclosed by large mats fastened to the walls in the shape of curtains; at regular distances torches of ocote wood, fixed in iron rings, spread a reddish and smoky light, sufficient, however, to guide them. After walking for about ten minutes, and traversing several passages communicating with each other, and forming a regular labyrinth, in which any one else must inevitably have lost his way, the captain stopped before a cell, and raising the curtains that formed the doorway, made his companions a sign to enter. Sandoval followed them, and let the mat fall again behind him.

The cell into which the captain introduced his guests was vast; the walls were rather lofty, and allowed the air to penetrate through invisible fissures, which rendered it pleasant, while wooden partitions divided it into several chambers. A golden censer, probably stolen from a church, and hanging from the roof, contained a lamp of fragrant oil, which spread a brilliant light through the cavern. Unfortunately, the rest of the furniture did not at all harmonise with this princely specimen, but was, on the contrary, most modest. It was composed of a large table of black oak, clumsily shaped, six equipals, and two butaccas, a sort of easy chair with sloping back, and which alone had any pretensions to comfort. The walls were decorated with antlers of elks and bighorns, buffalo horns, and grizzly-bear claws, the spolia opima of animals killed by the pirates during their chase on the desert.

The only thing that attracted attention was a magnificent rack, containing all the weapons used in America, from the lance, arrow, and sagaie, up to the sword, the machete, the double-barrelled gun, and the holster-pistol. It was evident that the pirate had given orders for the reception of his guests, for wooden plates, glasses, and silver dishes were arranged on the table among large pots of red clay, containing, some water and others mezcal and pulque, those two favourite beverages of the Mexicans. Orson, with his savage face, was ready to wait on the guests.

"To table, senores," Sandoval said gravely.

The others followed his example, and each drawing his knife from his belt, began a general and vigorous attack on a magnificent venison pasty. The appetite of the guests, sharpened by a long day's fasting, needed such a comforter. However, we are bound to do the chief of the pirates the justice of saying that his larder appeared amply supplied.

The first moments of the meal were passed in silence, and the Mexicans thought only of eating. But when hunger was appeased, and, according to the Anglo-American fashion generally admitted on the prairies, the bottle circulated, the apparent coldness that had prevailed among the company suddenly disappeared, and each began conversing with his next neighbour.

During the repast which threatened to degenerate into an orgie, two men alone had moderately applied themselves to the bottle: they were Sandoval and White Scalper. The chief of the pirates, while exciting his guests to drink, was very careful to retain his sobriety. He examined with some anxiety the singular man whom chance had given him as a guest; this gloomy face caused him a feeling of discomfort for which he could not account.

Fortunately for Sandoval, whose impatience and curiosity momentarily increased, Ruperto had an equal desire to explain the object of his visit to the prairies. At the moment, therefore, when the private conversation, growing more and more animated, had become general, and each seemed to be trying which could shout the loudest, the Texan smote the table several times loudly with the pommel of his dagger. The outs stopped instantaneously.

"What do you want, Ruperto?" Sandoval asked him.

"What do I want?" the other answered; "I want to speak."

"Silence!" the captain shouted; "now, go on, Ruperto; no one will interrupt you."

"Demonios!" the Texan said, with a laugh, "I have no pretence to abuse your patience."

"Act as you please, gossip; you are my guest, and, more than that, an old acquaintance, which gives you the right to do whatever you please here."

"Thanks to your gallantry, captain; I must, in the first place, in my own name and in that of the persons who accompany me, offer you sincere thanks for your splendid hospitality."

"Go on, go on," the captain said, carelessly.

"No, no; on the contrary, Caramba, a table so well served as yours is not to be found every day on the prairie."

"Halloh!" the captain said, laughingly; "did you not tell me, when I met you this evening, that you were sent to me by Fray Antonio?"

"I did, captain."

"A worthy monk," Sandoval observed; "he reminds me of the Rev. John Zimmers, a Protestant minister, who was hung about ten years back at Baton Rouge for bigamy. He was a very holy man! I remember that at the foot of the gallows he made the crowd an edifying speech, which drew tears from most of his hearers. But let us return to Fray Antonio."

"I left him in excellent health. Still, it is possible that he may be dangerously ill."

"Rayo de Dios! you alarm me, gossip. Explain yourself."

"It is very simple. Texas, wearied with the exactions of Mexico, has revolted to gain its liberty."

"Very good; I know it."

"You know, too, of course, that all the men of talent have arrayed themselves beneath the flag of Independence. Naturally Fray Antonio raised a cuadrilla, and offered his services to the insurgents."

"That is very ingenious," the captain said.

"Is it not? Oh! Fray Antonio is a clever politician."

"Yes, yes, and proof of it is that at the beginning of the insurrection he did not know to which party he belonged."

"What would you have?" Ruperto said; "it is so difficult to find one's way in a general upset; but now it is no longer the case."

"Ah! it seems that he is fixed?"

"Completely; he forms part of the Army of Liberation. Now, on the very day of y departure the insurgents were marching towards the Mexican forces to offer them battle. That is why I said to you it was possible that Fray Antonio might perhaps be dead."

"I hope that misfortune has not happened."

"And so do I. A few minutes before setting out Fray Antonio, who takes a great interest, as it seems, in the wounded Caballero who accompanies me, not wishing to abandon him alone and helpless in the power of the Mexicans, should the liberating army unfortunately be conquered, ordered me to lead him to you, for he felt certain you would take great care of his friend."

"He did right to count on me; I will not deceive his confidence. Caballero," he added, turning to the old man, "you know us by this time, and are aware that we are pirates. We offer you the hospitality of the desert, a frank and unbounded hospitality, and offer it without either asking who you are or what you have done before setting foot on our territory."

"On what conditions do you offer me all these advantages?" the old man asked.

"On none, senor," he answered; "we ask nothing of you, not even your name; we are proscribed and banished men; hence, every proscript, whatever be the motives that bring him here, has a right to a place by our fire. And now," he added, as he seized a bottle, "here is to your fortunate arrival among us, senor!"

"One moment, *senor*. Before replying to your toast I have, if you will permit me, a few words to say to you."

"We are listening to you, *senor*."

The old man rose, drew himself up to his full height, and looked silently at the company. A deep silence prevailed; suffering from lively anxiety, all impatiently waited for the Scalper to speak. At length he did so, while his face, which had hitherto been cold and stern, was animated by an expression of gentleness of which it would not have been thought capable.

"*Senores*," he said, "your frankness challenges mine; the generosity and grandeur of your reception compels me to make myself known. When a man comes to claim the support of men like yourselves he must keep nothing hidden from them. Yes, I am proscribed; yes, I am banished! but I am so by my own will. I could return to-morrow, if I pleased, to the bosom of society, which has never repelled me, but I remain in the desert to accomplish a duty I have imposed on myself; I pursue a vengeance, an implacable vengeance, which nothing can completely satiate, not even the death of the last of my enemies! a vengeance which is only a wild dream, a horrible nightmare, but which I pursue, and shall pursue, at all hazards, until the supreme hour when, on the point of giving my last sigh, I shall die with regret at not having sufficiently avenged myself. Such is the object of my life, the cause which made me abandon the life of civilised men to take up with that of wild beasts—VENGEANCE! Now you know what I am; when I have told you my name you will be well acquainted with me."

The old man's voice, at first calm and low, had gradually mounted to the diapason of the passions that agitated him, and had become sonorous and harsh. His hearers listened with panting chests, and, as it were, hanging on his lips, to this strange man, who, by revealing the secret of his life, had stirred up their hearts.

When the Scalper had ceased speaking, all rose as if by common accord, and, leaning their quivering hands on the table, bent over to him, awaiting, with feverish impatience, the revelation of his name. But, by a strange revolution, the wounded man seemed to have forgotten what was taking place around him, and no longer to remember either where he was or what he had said. His head was bowed on his chest; with his forehead resting on his right hand and his eyes fixed on the ground, he tried in vain to overcome the flood of bitter recollections, the ever-bleeding wound which in a moment of excitement he had so imprudently revived.

Sandoval laid his hand on his shoulder. At this touch the old man, roughly recalled to a feeling of external things, drew himself up as if he had received an electric shock, and gazed wildly round him.

"What do you want with me?" he asked.

"To tell you your name," the pirate answered, slowly.

"Ah!" he said, "then you know it?"

"I am sure of it; there are not two men of your stamp in the desert; you are the genius of evil if you are not White Scalper."

At this name an electric quiver traversed the limbs of the hearers. The old man raised his head haughtily.

"Yes," he said, "I am White Scalper."

During this long conversation a number of pirates, brought up either by idleness or curiosity, had entered the dining-room one after the other. On hearing this name uttered which they had been accustomed so long to admire, on seeing at length this man for whom they felt a secret terror, they burst into a formidable shout, which the resounding echoes repeated indefinitely, and which caused the roof to tremble as if agitated by an earthquake. The White Scalper made a signal to ask silence.

"*Senores*," he said, "I am very thankful for the friendly demonstrations of which I am the object. Up to the present I have refused every species of alliance; I

obstinately resolved to live alone and accomplish, without help, the work of destruction to which I have devoted myself. But, after what has passed here, I must break the promise I made myself; he who receives is bound to give! Henceforth I am one of yourselves, if you deem me worthy to form part of your cuadrilla."

At this proposal the huzzas and shouts of joy were redoubled with extreme frenzy. Sandoval frowned; he understood that his precarious power was menaced. But, too skilful and crafty to let the secret fears that agitated him be guessed, he resolved to outflank the difficulty, and regain, by a master-stroke, the power which he felt was slipping from his grasp. Raising the glass he held in his hand, he shouted in a thundering voice:

"Muchachos! I drink to White Scalper!"

"To White Scalper," the bandits joined in enthusiastically.

Sandoval allowed the first effervescence time to calm down. Himself exciting this enthusiasm, he at length requested silence at the moment when this enthusiasm had attained its paroxysm. For a few minutes his efforts were in vain, for heads were beginning to grow hot under the influence of copious and incessant libations of mezcal, pulque, and Catalonian refino. By degrees, however, and like the sea after a storm, the cries died out, a calm was re-established, and nothing was audible save a dull and confused murmur of whispered words. Sandoval hastened to profit by this transient moment of silence to speak again.

"Senores," he said, "I have a proposal to make, which, I believe, will suit you."

"Speak, speak," the pirates shouted.

"Our association," Sandoval continued, "is founded on the most entire equality of its members, who freely elect the man they consider most worthy to command."

"Yes, yes," they exclaimed.

"Long live Sandoval!" some said.

Sandoval, negligently leaning on the table, followed with an apparently indifferent glance these various manifestations, though he was suffering from lively anxiety, and his heart beat ready to burst his chest. He was playing for a heavy stake; he knew it, for he had, with the infallible glance of all ambitious men, calculated all the chances for and against. Hence, it was only by the strength of his will that he succeeded in giving his face a marble rigidity which did not permit the supreme agony he was suffering internally to be divined.

"You did me the honour to appoint me your chief, and I believe that hitherto I have rendered myself worthy of that honour."

He paused as if to await a reply. A murmur of assent gently tickled his ear.

"What is he driving at?" Orson asked.

"You shall know," said Sandoval, who overheard him. And he continued: "In the common interest, I consider it my duty this night to hand you back the authority with which you entrusted me. In a word, I offer you my resignation, proposing that you should elect on the spot White Scalper as your chief!"

It was only then that Sandoval really knew the feeling of his comrades towards him. Of two hundred pirates assembled at this moment in the dining-hall, two-thirds pronounced immediately for him, energetically refusing the resignation he offered; one-half the remaining third gave no sign of approval or disapproval. Thirty or forty of the bandits received the proposal with shouts of joy.

Still, as happens nearly always under similar circumstances, these thirty or forty individuals, by their shouts and yells, would soon have led others away, and would probably have become ere long an imposing majority, had not White Scalper himself interfered. The old adventurer did not at all desire the disgraceful honour of being elected the chief of this band of ruffians, whom he despised in his heart. He was, on the contrary, resolved to part with them so soon as his wounds were closed. Hence, at the moment when the shouts and oaths crossed each other in the air with

an intensity that grew more and more menacing, when already some of the pirates, their arguments being exhausted, were beginning to lay hands on their knives and pistols, and a frightful battle was about to begin between these men, among whom a moral feeling did not exist, and who were consequently restrained by no sentiment of honour or affection: he rose, and speaking amid the vociferations of these turbulent men, he protested energetically against the proposal made by Sandoval, not wishing, as he said, to accept anything but the honour of fighting by their side, and sharing their dangers, for he felt an incompetence to command.

Peace was thus restored as if by enchantment, and while the pirates drank floods of mezcal to celebrate the happy conclusion of this affair, the captain led his guests to a compartment separate from the grotto, where they were at liberty to rest themselves. Still Sandoval, who, rightly or wrongly, had for a moment found his power threatened by White Scalper, felt a malice for him in his heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CONVERSATION.

TRANQUIL and Loyal Heart, as we have seen, withdrew immediately the opportunity appeared favourable to them, and returned to the hunter's rancho, where Nô Eusebio had made all preparations to give them a hearty reception.

Dona Garillas received them with that calm and radiant smile which seemed to pass over her pale sad face like a sunbeam passing between two clouds. Attentive to satisfy their slightest desires, she seemed to be thankful to them for their return, and tried, by those thousand little attentions of which women alone possess the secret, to keep them as long as possible by her side.

The hunter's house, so peaceful and comfortable, although in the prejudiced sight of an European it would have seemed hardly above the most wretched labourer's cabin in this country, formed a contrast which was not without grandeur with the leather callis of the red-skins, those receptacles of vermin where the most utter neglect and complete forgetfulness were visible.

Loyal Heart, after respectfully kissing his mother's forehead, shaking hands with Nô Eusebio, and patting his dogs, which leapt up at him with joyous whines, sat down to table, making Tranquil a sign to follow his example. Since the previous night a singular change had taken place in the manner, and even countenance of the old hunter.

The young man watched pensively, and with a melancholy smile, the hunter's movements. When the meal was over, and the pipes were lit, after making his mother and Nô Eusebio a sign to withdraw, he turned to the Canadian—

"My guest," he said, "we are old friends, although we have known each other but a short time."

"Certainly! Loyal Heart, in the desert friendships grow rapidly, and we have been together under circumstances when two men can appreciate each other."

"Will you let me ask you a question?"

"Of course," the hunter answered.

"Stay," the young man continued; "will you promise to answer me this question?"

"Why not?" Tranquil said quietly.

"Who knows—*quien sabe?* as we Spanish Americans say," the young man replied with a smile.

"Nonsense," the Canadian replied, "I cannot foresee the possibility of my being unable to answer you."

"But, supposing it were so?"

"I do not suppose it; you are a man of too upright sense, and too great intelligence to fall into that error. So speak without fear."

"I will do so, as you authorise me; for you do so, I think."

"Understood."

"In that case, listen to me. I know you too well, or, at least, I fancy I know you too well to suppose that you have come here merely to pay me a visit, as you know you could meet me any day on the prairie. A most serious motive impelled you to wish to see me."

Tranquil gave a silent nod of assent. Loyal Heart went on after a moment's silence.

"You have been here now two days. You have already had several opportunities for a frank explanation, an explanation, by the way, which I desire with my whole heart, for I foresee that it will contain a service I can render you. Am I mistaken? Answer, old hunter."

For some minutes the Canadian seemed considerably embarrassed; this point-blank question troubled him singularly.

"On my word," he answered, at last, looking his questioner in the face, "I cannot contradict you."

"Ah!" the young man said with a smile of satisfaction, "I was not mistaken, then."

The Canadian shrugged his shoulders philosophically. Loyal Heart continued—

"Now, I demand in the name of that friendship that binds us—I demand, I say, that you should be frank with me, and without reservation or circumlocution, confess to me the motives which urged you to act as you have done."

"These motives are only honourable, be assured."

"I am convinced of it, my friend; but I repeat to you, I wish to know them."

"After all," the old hunter continued with the accent of a man who has formed a resolution, "why should I have secrets from you when I have come to claim your assistance? You shall know all. I am only a coarse adventurer, who received all the education he has on the desert; but I have always tried to benefit my neighbour, and requite good for evil as far as lay in my power; such, in two words, is my profession of faith."

"It is rigorously true," Loyal Heart said.

"Thanks, and frankly I believe it. But, with the exception of that, I know nothing. Desert life has only developed in me the instincts of the brute, without giving me any refinement."

"I confess that I do not see at all what you are driving at."

"You will soon comprehend me. From the first moment I saw you, with the first word you uttered, by a species of intuition, by one of those sympathies what are independent of the will, I felt myself attracted towards you. You were my friend during the few days we lived together, sharing the same couch under the vault of Heaven, running the same dangers, experiencing the same joys and sorrows. I believed that I appreciated you at your true value, and my friendship only increased in consequence. Hence, when I needed a sure and devoted friend, I thought of you at once."

"You did well."

"I know it," said Tranquil, with simple enthusiasm; "still, on entering this modest rancho, my ideas were completely modified; a doubt occurred to me. I

asked myself by what concourse of circumstances a man like you had confined himself to an Indian village and accepted all the wretchedness of a red-skin life. On seeing your mother so lovely and so kind, your old servant so devoted, and the way in which you behave within these walls, I thought that a great misfortune had suddenly burst on you and forced you for a time into exile. But I understood that I was not your equal, that between you and me there was a distinctly traced line of demarcation; then I felt oppressed in your company, for you are no longer the free hunter, having no other roof but the verdurous dome of our virgin forests, or other fortune than his rifle; in a word, you are no longer the comrade, the friend with whom I was so happy to share everything in the desert."

"All of which means?" Loyal Heart said, distinctly.

"That, being no longer able to be your comrade, and not wishing to be your servant, I shall retire."

"You are mad, Tranquil," the young man exclaimed. "What you say, I tell you, has not common sense."

"Still—?" the Canadian hazarded.

"Oh!" the other continued, "I have allowed you to speak, have I not? I listened to whatever you had to say without interruption, and it is now your turn. Without wishing it, you have caused an ever-living wound to bleed, by reminding me of things which I try to forget, and which cause the wretchedness of my whole life."

"I—I?" the hunter exclaimed, with a start of terror.

"Yes, you! but what matter? besides, you were walking blindly, not knowing where you were going; hence, I have no right to be angry with you, and am not so. But there is one thing I value above all, which I esteem more than life, and that is your friendship. I cannot consent to lose it. Confidence for confidence."

"No," Tranquil answered, clearly, "I have no claim to your confidence. You say that I have unintentionally caused you great suffering; that suffering would only be increased by your confession. I will not listen to you."

"You must, my friend, both for your sake and my own. Besides," he added, with a melancholy smile, "this secret which crushed me, and which I have hitherto kept in my own bosom, it will be a great consolation to me, be assured, to confide to a real friend. And then, you must know this: my life is only one long expiation; unhappily I tremble lest the present and the future will not suffice to expiate the past."

"You forget God, my son," a voice said, with an accent of supreme majesty, "God, who cannot fail you and will judge you."

And Dona Garillas, who had for some moments been listening to the conversation of the two men, crossed the room with a majestic step, and laid her white and delicate hand on the shoulder of her son, while giving him a glance full of powerful love.

"Oh! I am a wretched ingrate!" the young man exclaimed, sorrowfully; "in my hideous egotism I for a moment forgot you, my mother."

"Rafael, you are my first-born. What I did nine years ago I would do again to-day. But now, let what you are about to hear be a consolation to you. I am proud of you, my son; whatever pain you once caused me, the same amount of joy and pride you cause me to-day. All the Indian tribes that traverse the vast solitudes of the prairie have the greatest respect and deepest veneration for you; has not the name these primitive men have given you become the synonyme of honour; are you not, in a word, Loyal Heart? What more do you want?"

The young man shook his head sadly.

"Alas! mother," he said, "can I ever forget that I have been a gambler, assassin, and incendiary?"

Tranquil could not restrain a start of terror.

"Oh, it is impossible!" he muttered.

The young man heard him, and turning to him, said—

"Yes, my friend, I have been a gambler, assassin, and incendiary. Well, now," he added, "do you still fancy yourself unworthy of my friendship? Do you still consider you are not my equal?"

The Canadian rose while the young man bent on him a searching glance; he went up to Dona Garillas, and bowed to her with a respect mingled with admiration.

"Senora," he said, "whatever crimes a man may have committed in a moment of irresistible passion, that man must be absolved by all when, in spite of his fault, he inspires a devotion so glorious, so perfect, and so noble as yours."

"Thanks, my friend," Loyal Heart answered; "thanks for words which I feel convinced are the expression of your innermost thoughts; thanks in my mother's name and my own! Yours is a frank and upright nature. You have restored me the courage which at times abandons me, and have raised me in my own sight; but this expiation to which I condemned myself would not be complete unless I told you, in their fullest details, all the events of my life."

"Yes," said his mother, "you are right, my son. A man must have courage to look back, in order to acquire the strength to walk worthily forward. It is only by reverting to the past that you can understand the present and have hope in the future. Speak, speak, my son, and if in the course of your narrative your memory or your courage fail you, your mother will be here at your side."

Tranquil regarded with admiration this strange woman, whose gestures and words harmonised so well with her majestic bearing; this mother, whose sweet face reflected so well her noble sentiments; he felt himself very small and wretched in the presence of this chosen nature, who, of all the passions, knew only one—maternal love.

"Loyal Heart," he said, with an emotion he could not master, "since you insist, I will listen to the narrative of the events which brought you to the desert; but be assured of this, whatever I may hear, since you are willing still to give me the title of friend, here is my hand, take it, I will never fail you. Now go on, I am ready to listen to you."

Loyal Heart warmly returned the pressure of the hunter's hand, and made him sit down on his right hand, while Dona Garillas took her place on his left.

"Now, listen to me," he said.

At this moment the door opened, and Nô Eusebio appeared.

"*Mi amo*," he said, "the Indian chief, called Black-deer, wishes to speak to you."

"What, Black-deer?" the hunter said with surprise; "impossible! he must be engaged with his marriage festivities."

"Pardon me," Tranquil observed; "you forget, Loyal Heart, that when we left the feast the chief came up to us, saying in a low voice that he had a serious communication to make to us."

"That is true; in fact, I did forget it. Let him enter, Nô Eusebio. My friend," he added, addressing Tranquil, "it is impossible for me at this moment to begin a story which would be interrupted almost at the first sentence; but soon, I hope, you shall know it."

"I will leave you to settle your Indian affairs," Dona Garillas said with a smile, and quitted the room.

Tranquil, we are bound to confess, was in his heart delighted at an interruption which saved him from listening to the narrative of painful events. The worthy hunter possessed the precious quality of not being at all curious to know the history of men he liked, for his native integrity led him to tear seeing them break down in his esteem.

At the moment when Dona Garillas left the room, Nô Eusebio introduced the Indian chief by another door. Forgetful of that assumed stoicism so habitual to

Indians, Black-deer seemed suffering from a lively anxiety. The warrior's gloomy air, his frowns—nothing, in a word, recalled in him the man who had just contracted a union he had long desired, and which fulfilled all his wishes; his countenance, on the contrary, was so grave and stern.

"Wah!" Loyal Heart said good-humouredly, "you have a precious sad face. Did you, on entering the village, perceive five crows on your right, or did your scalp-knife stick in the ground thrice in succession?"

The chief, before replying, bent a piercing glance around.

"No," he said, "Black-deer has not seen five crows on his right; he saw a fox on his left, and a flight of owls in the bushes."

"You know, chief, that I do not at all understand you," Loyal Heart said laughing.

"Nor do I, on my honour," Tranquil observed.

"My brothers can laugh," said the chief, "they are pale-faces; they care little whether good or evil happens to the Indians."

"Pardon, chief," Loyal Heart answered, "my friend and myself had no intention of insulting you."

"I am aware of it," the chief replied, "my brothers cannot suppose that on a day like this I should be sad."

"That is true, but now our ears are open: my brother will speak."

The Indian seemed to hesitate, but in a moment he walked up to Loyal Heart and Tranquil, seated by his side, and bent over them, so that his head touched theirs.

"The situation is grave," he said, "and I have only a few minutes to spare, ~~so~~ my brothers will listen seriously. I must return to the call of Blackbird, where my friends and relatives await me."

"We are listening," the two men answered with one voice.

Ere going on, Black-deer walked round the room, inspecting the walls and opening the doors, as if fearing listeners. Then, probably reassured by this inspection that no one could hear him, he returned to the two white men, and said to them in a low voice, as an additional precaution—

"A great danger menaces the Antelope Comanches."

"How so, chief?"

"The Apaches are watching the neighbourhood of the village."

"How do you know that?"

"I have seen them."

"My brother has seen the Apaches?"

The chief smiled proudly.

"Yes," he said, "Black-deer is a great brave, he has the fine scent of my brother's rastros, he has smelt the enemy; smelling is seeing, with a warrior."

"Yes, but my brother must take care," Loyal Heart answered, "perhaps he is mistaken."

Black-deer shrugged his shoulders with disdain.

"This night there was not a breath of air in the forest, yet the leaves of the trees moved, and the tall grass was agitated."

"Wah! that is astonishing," said Loyal Heart; "an envoy of the Buffalo Apaches is in the village at this moment, we must be threatened by fearful trickery."

"Blue-fox is a traitor who has sold his people," the Indian continued; "what can be hoped from such a man? he has come here to send the warriors to sleep."

"Yes," said Loyal Heart thoughtfully, "that is possible. Has my brother warned the chiefs?"

"Yes, while Blue-fox requested the hachesto to assemble the council, Black-deer spoke with Boundng Panther, Lynx, and Blackbird."

"Very good, what have they resolved?"

"Blue-fox will be retained as an hostage. At sunset two hundred warriors, under the orders of Loyal Heart, and guided by Black-deer, will go and surprise the enemy, who, knowing their emissary to be in the village, will have no suspicion, but fall into the trap they intended to set for us."

Loyal Heart remained silent for a moment.

"Let my brother hear me," he said presently; "I am ready to obey the orders of the sovereign council of the sachems of the tribe, but I will not let the warriors entrusted to me be massacred. The Buffalo Apaches are old chattering and crying squaws, without courage, to whom we will give petticoats. But they are now ambushed at a spot selected beforehand, and are acquainted with all its resources. However well my young men may be guided by my brothers, the Apaches will come on their trail."

"What does my brother propose?" Black-deer asked.

"The sun has run two-thirds of its course, Black-deer will warn the warriors to proceed each by himself, to the mountain of the Blackbear, one hour after sunset. In this way they will seem to be going hunting separately, and excite no suspicion. When the sun has disappeared on the horizon, in the sacred cavern of the Red Mountain, my brother the pale hunter and myself will mount our horses and join the red-skins. Have I spoken well?"

While Loyal Heart was thus explaining the plan he had instantaneously conceived, the Indian chief gave marks of the greatest joy.

"My brother has spoken well," he answered; "the Wacondah is with him; his medicine is very powerful, though his hair is black; the wisdom of the Master of Life resides in him. It shall be done as he desires."

"Good; but my brother will take care: Blue-fox is very clever!"

"Blue-fox is an Apache dog, whose ears Black-deer will crop. My brother the hunter need not feel alarmed."

After exchanging a few more sentences to come to a full understanding, Black-deer withdrew.

"You will come with me, I suppose, Tranquil?" the young man asked the Canadian.

"Of course!" the other replied; "did you doubt it? what the deuce should I do here during your absence? I prefer accompanying you, especially as, if I am not mistaken, there will be a jolly row."

"You are not mistaken. It is evident to me that the Apaches would not have come so near unless they were in force."

"Well, in that case, two hundred men are as nothing; you should have asked for more."

"Why so? in a surprise the man who attacks is always the stronger; we will try to get the first blow."

"That is true, by Jove! I am delighted at the affair; I have not smelt powder for some time."

At this outburst, Loyal Heart began laughing, Tranquil joined in chorus, and they spoke about something else.

CHAPTER XIV.

TWO ENEMIES.

In the high American latitudes night comes on suddenly, and without twilight, and when the sun has disappeared on the horizon, it is perfect night; now, at the period

of the year when the events occurred the sun set at seven o'clock. Half-an-hour later Tranquil and Loyal Heart, mounted on excellent mustangs, left the rancho, followed by Nô Eusebio, who insisted on joining them, and whom no entreaties or exhortations could keep back. They had only gone a few yards across the square, however, when the Canadian laid his hand on the young man's bridle.

"What do you want?" the latter asked.

"Shall we not take our comrades with us?"

"Do you think it necessary?"

"Well, with the exception of the monk, who, I fear, is not worth much, they are stout fellows, whose rifles might prove very useful to us."

"That is true; warn them in a few words."

"Do you not think the departure of so large a party may arouse the suspicions of Blue-fox, who is doubtless prowling about the neighbourhood?"

"Not at all, they are white men; if he saw Indian warriors departing thus, I am sure his doubts would be aroused; but he will never suppose that hunters have discovered his treachery."

"You may be right, but in any case it is better to run the risk; wait for me, I shall be back in ten minutes."

"All right, go along."

Tranquil went off rapidly, while Loyal Heart and Nô Eusebio halted a few yards off. The adventurers gleefully accepted the proposal Tranquil made them; for such men, a battle is a festival, especially when they have Indians to fight; ten minutes scarce elapsed, therefore, ere the Canadian rejoined the young man.

Loyal Heart was mistaken in supposing that Blue-fox would not be alarmed on seeing the white hunters leave. The red-skin, like all men who meditate treachery, had his eyes constantly open, and his watchful mind took umbrage at the most insignificant matters. Although the Comanche chiefs had acted with the greatest prudence, the Apache perceived that he was watched, and that, though honourably treated, he was in reality a prisoner. He pretended not to suspect what was going on, but redoubled his attention. During the past day he had seen several warriors mount their horses one after the other, and set out in groups of two, three, and four.

Not one of these warriors having returned by sunset, this circumstance caused the red-skin chief deep thought, and he came to the conclusion that his plans were discovered, and that the Comanches were attempting to surprise the persons who desired to lay a trap for them, and the departure of the white hunters would have removed the chief's final doubts, had any such remained. The situation was growing not only very critical, but most perilous for him.

Blue-fox was a warrior renowned for his wisdom in council as for his bravery in fight: instances of extraordinary audacity and temerity were narrated about him, but the courage with which the chief was gifted was calm, reasoning, and ever subordinate to events.

Blue-fox was sitting in front of the entrance of the calli of honour the Comanches had given him during the period of his stay with them, calmly smoking his pipe, when the white hunters passed before him. He displayed neither surprise nor curiosity at the sight of them, but by an almost imperceptible movement of his head and shoulders, he looked after them with a flashing glance till they disappeared in the darkness.

Blue-fox still sat smoking; gradually the arm that supported his calumet fell on his knees, his head bowed on his chest, and the Apache sachem seemed, as so often happens to the Indians, to have yielded to the narcotic influence of the moriche; and a long time elapsed ere he made the slightest movement. Was the chief really asleep?

All at once the curtain of the calli was raised, and a hand was roughly laid on the

sleepers' shoulder. The chief started at this touch, and sprang up as if a serpent had stung him.

"The nights are cold," said an ironical voice; "the dew is profuse, and ices the blood; my brother is wrong to sleep thus in the open air."

Blue-fox, by a powerful effort, extinguished the fire of his glance, composed his features, and answered—

"I thank my brother for his affectionate observation; in truth, the nights are very cold, and it is better to sleep in a calli than in the open air."

He rose without further discussion, and re-entered the hut. A great fire was kindled in the interior of the calli, which, besides, was illumined by a torch of ocote wood stuck in the ground, whose ruddy and vacillating glare imparted a blood-red hue to surrounding objects. The man whose advice had surprised Blue-fox let the curtain fall behind him, and entered after the chief. This man was Black-deer; without uttering a syllable, he sat down before the fire, and began arranging the logs with a certain degree of symmetry. Blue-fox gazed on him for a moment with an undefinable expression.

"My brothers, the Antelope Comanches," he said, "are great warriors; they understand the laws of hospitality better than any other nation."

"The Antelope Comanches," Black-deer answered, "know that Blue-fox is a renowned chief, and one of the great braves of the Apaches; they wish to do him honour."

The chief bowed.

"Does this honour go so far as to compel so great a warrior as my brother to watch over my sleep?"

"My brother is the guest of the Antelopes."

Like two experienced duellists the chiefs had crossed swords; having felt their blades, they perceived that they were of equal strength.

"Then," Blue-fox continued, "my brother will remain in the calli with me."

The chief gave a nod of assent.

"Wah! I know for what reason the Comanche sachems treat me thus: they are aware that Black-deer and Blue-fox, though each adopted by a different tribe, are yet brothers of the great and powerful nation of the Snake Pawnees; hence they suppose that the two chiefs would be pleased to converse together and recall their early years."

"My brother is rightly called the Fox," the Comanche replied; "his craft is great."

"What does my brother mean?" the Apache said.

"I speak the truth, and my brother is well aware of it," Black-deer answered; "why should we thus try to deceive each other? we have been too long acquainted. Let my brother listen to me: the Antelope Comanches are not inexperienced children; they know for what purpose my brother has come."

"*Ohé!*" the chief said, "I hear a mocking-bird singing, but I do not at all understand what it means."

"Perhaps so, but to remove my brother's doubt I will speak to him frankly."

"Can my brother do so?" the Apache continued.

"The chief shall judge:—For some moons past the Buffalo Apaches have been trying to take a brilliant revenge on the Comanches for a defeat the warriors of my nation inflicted on them, but the Apaches are chattering old women who possess no craft; the Comanches will give them petticoats."

The chief's eyebrows were almost meeting at this insult; a flash of fury burst from his eyes, but he managed to overpower his feelings. He drew himself up with supreme majesty and folded himself in his buffalo-robe.

"My brother, Black-deer, forgets to whom he is speaking," he said; "Blue-fox is the envoy of his nation to the Comanches; his person must be respected."

"The Apache chief is mistaken," Black-deer replied; "he is not the envoy of a brave nation, but only the spy of a pack of dogs. While Blue-fox tries to deceive the Comanche sachems, and lull them to sleep in a treacherous serenity, the Apache dogs are hidden like moles in the tall grass."

"Blue-fox looked round the calli, and bounding like a jaguar, rushed on his foe-man, brandishing his knife.

"Die, dog!" he shouted.

Since the beginning of their singular conversation Black-deer had not stirred; he had remained tranquilly crouching over the fire, but his eyes had not lost one of the Apache's movements, and when the latter rushed madly at him he started aside, and springing up with extreme rapidity, seized the chief in his nervous arms, and both rolled on the ground, intertwined like serpents. In their fall they fell on the torch, which was extinguished; hence, the terrible and silent conflict went on between the two men by the uncertain gleam of the fire, each striving to stab his enemy. They were both of nearly the same age, their strength and skill were equal, and an implacable hatred animated them; in this horrible duel, which must evidently terminate in the death of one of them, they disdained the usual tricks employed in such fights, as they cared little about death so long as their enemy received the mortal blow simultaneously.

Still, Black-deer had a great advantage over his adversary, who, blinded by fury, and not calculating any of his movements, could not long sustain this deadly contest without himself becoming a victim to the insensate rage which had urged him to attack the Comanche. The latter, on the contrary, completely master of himself, acted with the greatest prudence, and by the way he had seized his enemy had pinned his arms and rendered it impossible for him to employ his weapons.

They had been wrestling thus for a long time, foot against foot, chest to chest, and it was as yet impossible to guess which would gain the upper hand, when suddenly the curtain of the hut was raised, and a brilliant light inundated the interior. Several men entered; they were Comanche warriors. They arrived later than they should have done, for all that took place at this moment had been arranged before hand between them and Black-deer. Five minutes later their interference would have been useless, as they would probably have found one of the two combatants killed by the other, or perhaps both, such fury and vindictiveness were displayed in the atrocious struggle.

When Blue-fox saw the help that arrived for his enemy he judged the position at a glance, and felt that he was lost; still, the cunning and coolness innate with Indians did not abandon him at this supreme moment; for red-skins, whatever may be the hatred they feel, do not kill an enemy who openly allows that he is conquered. The Apache chief, so soon as he perceived the Comanches, ceased his efforts, and removed the arms which had hitherto held Black-deer as in a vice; then, throwing back his head and closing his eyes, he lay motionless.

Blue-fox was aware that he would be regarded as a prisoner, and kept for the stake of torture, but until the hour marked for his punishment arrived he retained the hope of escaping, with whatever care he might be guarded.

Black-deer rose, greatly shaken by the rude embrace; but, instead of striking his enemy, who lay disarmed at his feet, he returned his knife to his belt. The Apache's calculations were correct.

"Blue-fox is a great brave, he fought like a courageous warrior," said Black-deer; "as he must be fatigued he will rise."

And he offered his hand to help him in rising. The Apache made no movement to pick up his weapons, but frankly accepted the offered hand and rose.

"The Comanche dogs will see a warrior die," he said; "Blue-fox laughs at their tortures; they are not capable of making one of his muscles quiver."

"Good! my brother will see," and turning to the sachems, he said, "when will this warrior die?"

"To-morrow at sunset," the most aged of the Indians laconically answered.

"My brother has heard," Black-deer continued; "has he any remark to make?"

"Blue-fox does not fear death, but ere he goes to hunt on the happy hunting-grounds he has several important matters to settle."

The Comanches bowed in assent.

"Blue-fox," the Apache chief continued, "must return among the warriors of his nation."

"How long will the chief remain absent?"

"One whole moon."

"Good! What will the chief do to insure his word?"

"Blue-fox will leave an hostage."

"The sachem of the Buffalo Apaches is a great brave; what warrior of his nation can die in his stead?"

"I will give the flesh of my flesh, the blood of my blood, the bone of my bone. My son will remain."

The Comanches exchanged a very meaning glance. There was a rather lengthened silence, during which the Apache, haughtily folded in his buffalo-robe, stoically waited. At length Black-deer spoke again.

"My brother has recalled to my memory," he said, "the years of our youth, when we were both children of the Snake Pawnees, and hunted in company the elk and the asshata in the prairies of the Upper Missouri. The early years are the sweetest; the words of my brother made my heart tremble with joy. I will be kind to him; his son shall be his substitute, though he is still very young; but he knows how to crawl like the serpent and fly like the eagle, and his arm is strong in fight. But Blue-fox will reflect before pledging his word. If on the evening of the twenty-eighth sun my brother has not returned to take his place at the foot of the stake of torture, his son will die."

"I thank my brother," the Apache replied; "on the twenty-eighth sun I shall return: there is my hand."

"And here is mine."

The two enemies clasped in cordial pressure the two hands which, a few minutes before, had been seeking so eagerly to take each other's life; then Blue-fox unfastened the cascabel skin that attached his long hair in the form of a cap on the top of his head, and removed the white eagle plume fixed above his right ear.

"My brother will lend me his knife," he said.

"My brother's knife is at his feet," the Comanche answered; "so great a warrior must not remain unarmed."

The chief stooped, picked up his knife, and thrust it in his girdle.

"Here is the plume of a chief," he said, as he gave it to Black-deer, cutting off a tress of the long hair, which, being no longer fastened, fell in disorder on his shoulders; he added, "my brother will keep this lock, it forms part of the scalp that belongs to him: the chief will come to ask it back again on the appointed day."

"Good!" the Comanche answered, taking the hair and the plume, "my brother will follow me."

The Comanches, unmoved spectators of this scene, shook their torches to revive the flame, and all the Indians leaving the calli, proceeded in the direction of the medicine-lodge, which stood, as we have seen, in the centre of the square between the ark of the first man and the stake of torture. It was toward the latter that the chiefs proceeded with that slow and solemn step they employ in serious matters. As they passed in front of the callis, the curtains were raised, the inhabitants came out, hold-

ing torches, and followed the procession. When the chiefs reached the stake an immense crowd filled the square.

There was something strange and striking in the scenes offered at this moment by the square, under the light of the torches, whose flame the wind blew in all directions. The chiefs halted at the foot of the stake and formed a semi-circle, in the centre of which Blue-fox stationed himself.

"My brother has given his pledge, he can summon his son," said Black-deer; "the lad is not far off."

The Apache smiled cunningly.

"The young of the eagle always follows the powerful flight of its parent," he replied; "the warriors will part to the right and left to grant him a passage."

At a silent sign from Black-deer there was a movement in the crowd, which fell back and left a passage through the centre; Blue-fox then thrust his fingers in his mouth, and imitated thrice the call of the hawk. In a few minutes a similar but very faint cry answered him. The chief renewed his summons, and this time the answer was shriller and more distinct. For the third time the Apache repeated the signal, which was answered close at hand; the rapid gallop of a horse became audible, and almost immediately an Indian warrior dashed up at full speed. This warrior crossed the entire square without evidencing the slightest surprise. He stopped short at the foot of the stake, dismounted, and placed himself by the side of Blue-fox, to whom he merely said—

"Here I am."

This warrior was the son of the Apache chief, a tall and nobly-built lad of sixteen to seventeen.

"This boy is my son," Blue-fox said to the Comanche chiefs.

"Good!" they replied, bowing courteously.

"Does my son consent to remain as an hostage in place of his father?" Black-deer asked him.

The young man bowed his head in assent.

"My son knows that if his father does not come to liberate his pledge, he will die in his place?"

"I know it," he said, with a smile of contempt.

"And my son accepts?"

"I do."

"Good!" the chief continued, "let my son look."

He then went up to the stake and fastened to it the feather and lock of hair Blue-fox had given him.

"This feather and this hair will remain here until the man to whom they belong returns to claim them."

The Apache chief answered in his turn—

"I swear on my totem to come and redeem them at the appointed time."

"Wah! my brother is free," Black-deer continued; "here is the feather of a chief; it will serve him as a recognition if the warriors of my nation were to meet him. Still, my brother will remember that he is forbidden communicating in any way with the braves of his nation ambushed round the village."

"Blue-fox will remember it."

After uttering these few words without even exchanging a look with his son, who stood motionless by his side, the chief took the feather Black-deer offered him, leaped on the horse which had brought the young man, and started at a gallop. When he had disappeared in the darkness, the chiefs bound the boy securely, and confined him in the medicine-lodge.

"Now," said Black-deer, "for the others."

And mounting his horse in his turn, he left the village.

CHAPTER XV.

THE AMBUSCADE.

THE village of the Antelope Comanches was built in an amphitheatrical shape, and descended with a gentle incline to the river. This position prevented the enemy surrounding the village, whose approaches were guarded from surprise by the trees having been felled for some distance.

Loyal Heart and his comrades advanced slowly, with their rifles on their thigh, attentively watching the neighbourhood, and ready, at the slightest suspicious movement in the tall grass, to execute a vigorous charge. All, however, remained quiet round them; at times they heard a coyote baying at the moon, or the noise of an owl concealed by the foliage; but that was all, and a leaden silence fell again on the savannah. At times they saw in the bluish rays of the moon indistinct forms appear on the banks of the river; but these wandering shadows were evidently wild beasts which had left their lurking-places to come down and drink.

The march continued, until the adventurers had reached the covert, when a dense gloom suddenly enveloped them, and did not allow them to distinguish objects ten yards ahead. Loyal Heart did not consider it prudent to advance further in a neighbourhood he did not know, and where he saw the risk at each step of falling into an ambushade; consequently the little band halted.

From time to time they saw horsemen crossing a clearing, and all going in different directions; some passed close without perceiving the hunters, owing to the precautions the latter had taken, and then disappeared in the forest. Several hours passed thus; the moon had disappeared, and the darkness became denser. Loyal Heart, not knowing to what he should attribute Black-deer's lengthened absence, and fearing some unforeseen misfortune, was about to give the order for returning, when Tranquil, who, by crawling, had reached the open plain, suddenly returned to his comrades.

"What is the matter?" Loyal Heart whispered.

"I cannot say," the hunter answered, "I do not understand it myself. About an hour back, an Indian suddenly sprang up by my side as if emerging from the ground, and leaping on a horse, started at full speed in the direction of the village."

"That is strange," Loyal Heart muttered; "and you do not know who the Indian is?"

"Apache; and that is just what staggers me. How could an Apache venture to the village alone?"

"There is something up we do not know; and then the signals we heard?"

"We must rejoin our friends."

Loyal Heart shook his head.

"No," he said, "we must employ some other method, for I promised Black-deer to help him in this expedition."

"It is evident that important events have occurred among the tribe."

"That is my opinion too, but you know the prudence of the Indians; stay," he added, "I have an idea; we shall soon know what is taking place; leave me to act."

"Do you require our help?"

"Not positively; I shall not go out of sight, but if you see me in danger, come up."

"All right."

Loyal Heart took a long rope of plaited leather, which served him as a picquet cord,

and laying down his rifle, which might have impeded him in the execution of his daring plan, lay down on the ground and crawled away like a serpent.

Loyal Heart stopped behind an enormous block of red granite, whose height enabled him to stand up, in shelter on all sides save in the direction of the forest. But he had no great risk to run from any concealed enemies, for the night was so dark that it would have been necessary to have followed the hunter's every movement, to discover the spot where he now was.

Loyal Heart was a Mexican; like all his countrymen, whose skill is proverbial in the management of certain weapons, from his youth he had been familiarised with the terrible lasso. The lasso is a strip of plaited leather, rendered supple by means of grease. It is ordinarily forty-five to fifty-feet in length, one of the ends terminating in a running knot, the other being fastened to an iron ring riveted in the saddle; the rider whirls it round his head, sets his horse at a gallop, and on arriving within thirty or five-and-thirty yards of the man or animal he is pursuing, he lets the lasso fly, so that the running knot may fall on the shoulders of his victim. At the same time that he lets the lasso go, the rider makes his horse suddenly turn in the opposite direction, and the enemy he has lassoed is, in spite of the most strenuous resistance, hurled down and dragged after him.

Afoot matters are effected much in the same fashion, save that the lassoer is obliged to display great muscular strength, and is often dragged along for a considerable distance. Where this weapon is in general use, people naturally study the means to neutralise its effects, the most efficacious being to cut the lasso. This is why all horsemen carry in their boot, within arm's length, a long and sharp knife; still, as the horseman is nearly always unexpectedly lassoed, he is strangled ere he has had time to draw his knife. Of one hundred riders lassoed thus in a combat or chase, seventy-five are inevitably killed, and the others only escape by a miracle, so much skill, strength, and coolness are needed to cut the fatal knot.

Loyal Heart had the simple idea of forming a running knot at the end of his picquet-rope, and lassoing the first rider who passed. On getting behind the rock he unrolled the long cord he had fastened round his body; then, after making the slip-knot with all the care it demands, he coiled the lasso in his hand and waited. Chance favoured his project, for, within ten minutes, he heard the gallop of a horse going at full speed. Loyal Heart listened attentively; the sound approached with great rapidity, and soon the black outline of a horseman stood out in the night. The direction followed by the rider compelled him to pass within a short distance of the block of granite. Loyal Heart spread out his legs to have a firmer holdfast, bent his body slightly forward, and whirled the lasso round his head. At the moment when the horseman came opposite to him, Loyal Heart let the lasso fly, and it fell with a whiz on the shoulders of the rider, who was roughly hurled to the ground ere he knew what was happening to him. His horse, which was at full speed, went on, but perceiving that its rider had left it, slackened its pace, and presently halted.

In the meanwhile Loyal Heart bounded like a tiger on the man he had so suddenly unsaddled. The latter had not uttered a cry, but remained motionless. Loyal Heart at first fancied him dead, but it was not so; his first care was to free the wounded man from the running knot, drawn so tightly round his neck, in order to enable him to breathe; then, without taking the trouble to look at his victim, he threw him over his shoulders, and returned where his comrades were awaiting him.

The latter had seen, or at least heard, what had happened; and far from dreaming of the means employed by the young man, they knew not to what they should attribute the rough way in which the rider had been hurled from his horse.

"Oh, oh," Tranquil said, "I fancy you have made a fine capture."

"I think so too," Loyal Heart answered, as he deposited his burden on the ground.

"How on earth did you manage to unsaddle him?"

"Oh! in the simplest way possible. I lassoed him."

"By Jove!" the hunter exclaimed, "I suspected it. But let us see the nature of the game. This fellow will not speak, in all probability."

"Who knows? at any rate we can question him."

"Yes—but let us first make sure of him, for it would not be pleasant to have captured a friend."

"May the Lord forbid!" Loyal Heart said.

The hunters bent over the prisoner, who was apparently motionless.

"Oh," the Canadian suddenly said, "whom have we here? On my soul, compadre, an old acquaintance."

"You are right," Loyal Heart answered, "it is Blue-fox."

"Blue-fox?" the hunters exclaimed, in surprise.

The adventurers were not mistaken; the Indian horseman so skilfully lassoed by Looyl Heart was really the Apache chief. After examining him attentively for a moment, Loyal Heart unfastened the bonds that held him, and fell back a step.

"My brother can rise," he said: "only old women remain thus stretched on the ground."

Blue-fox reached his feet at a bound.

"The chief is no old woman," he said, "his heart is large; he laughs at the anger of his enemies."

"We are not your enemies, chief; we feel no hatred or anger towards you; it is you, on the contrary, who are ours. Are you disposed to answer our questions?"

"I could refrain from doing so, were it my good pleasure."

"I do not think so," said John Davis; "we have secrets to untie the tongue of those we question."

"Try them on me," the Indian observed, haughtily.

"We shall see," said the American.

"Stop!" said Loyal Heart; "there is in all this something extraordinary, so leave it to me."

"As you please," said John Davis.

"How is it," Loyal Heart presently went on, "that you, who were sent by the Apaches to treat for peace with the Comanches, were thus leaving the village in the middle of the night, not as a friend?"

The chief smiled contemptuously, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Why should I tell you what has passed? it would be uselessly losing precious time; suffice it for you to know that I left the village with the general consent of the chiefs, and if I was galloping, it was probably because I was in a hurry."

"Hum!" said the hunter; "you will permit me to remark, chief, that your answer is very vague."

"It is the only one, however, I am enabled to give you."

"Perhaps so; but listen: we are awaiting Black-deer, and he shall decide your fate."

"As it pleases the pale hunter. When the Comanche chief arrives, my brother will see that the Apache sachem has spoken truly, that his tongue is not forked."

"I hope so."

At this moment the signal agreed on between Black-deer and the hunters was heard.

"Here is the chief," the hunter said.

"Good," the latter simply answered.

Five minutes later the sachem indeed reached the spot where the adventurers were assembled. His first glance fell on the Apache, standing upright with folded arms in the circle formed by the hunters.

"What is Blue-fox doing here?" he asked.

"The chief can ask the pale warriors, they will answer," said the Apache.

Black-deer turned to Loyal Heart; the latter, not waiting till he was addressed, related in the fullest detail what had occurred; how he had captured the chief, and the conversation he had had with him.

"Why did not my brother show the totem I gave him?" asked Black-deer.

"For what good, as my brother was coming?"

The Comanche frowned.

"My brother will be careful to remember that he has passed his word, and treachery will cost his son's life."

A shudder passed over the Indian's body, although his features lost none of their marble-like rigidity.

"Blue-fox has sworn on his totem," he replied; "that oath is sacred, and he will keep it."

"Ocht! my brother is free, he can start at once."

"I must find my horse again, which has escaped."

"Does my brother take us for children that he says such things to us?" Black-deer replied angrily. "The horse of an Indian chief never abandons its master."

Blue-fox made no reply; his black eye shot forth a flash of fury, but that was all; he bent forward, seemed to be listening for a few moments, and then gave a shrill whistle, almost immediately after which there was a rustling in the branches, and the chief's horse laid its fine and intelligent head on its master's shoulder. The latter patted the noble animal, leaped on its back, and digging in his spurs, started at full speed, without taking further leave of the hunters, who were quite startled by this hurried departure. John Davis, by an instinctive movement, swift as thought, raised his rifle.

"My brother must not fire," said Black-deer, "the sound would betray our presence."

"That is true," the American said; "but I should have been very glad to get rid of that ill-favoured scoundrel."

"My brother will find him again," said the Indian.

"I hope so, and if it should happen I assure you that no one will be able to prevent me killing that reptile."

"No one will try to do so, my brother may rest assured."

"Nothing less would console me for the magnificent opportunity you make me lose to-day."

The Indian laughed, and continued—

"I will explain to you at another moment how it happens that this man is free to retire in peace, when we are threatened by an ambuscade formed by him; but my warriors are now at their post, only awaiting the signal to begin the contest; do my pale brothers still intend to accompany us?"

"Certainly, chief; we are here for that purpose."

"Good; still, I must warn my brothers that they will run a great risk."

"Nonsense," Loyal Heart replied, "it will be welcome, for are we not accustomed to danger?"

"Then to horse, and let us start."

"Are you not afraid," Loyal Heart observed, "lest Blue-fox has warned his comrades?"

"No: he cannot do so, he has sworn it."

The hunters did not insist further, they knew with what religious exactness Indians generally keep oaths, and the good faith and loyalty they display in the accomplishment of this duty. The chief's answer consequently convinced them that they had nothing to apprehend from the Apache sachem.

They now followed a narrow path running between two ravines covered with

thick grass. This path, after running for a mile and a half, debouched on a species of cross roads, where the adventurers had halted for an instant. This spot, called by the Indians the Elk Pass, had been selected by Black-deer as the gathering place of some forty picked warriors, who were to join the white men and act with them. The hunters had hardly debouched at the cross roads, ere the Comanches emerged from behind the thicket which had concealed them.

The band was formed in close column, and scouts went ahead, preceding it but a few yards, and attentively examining the thickets. For many an hour they marched on, nothing attracting their attention, when suddenly a shot was fired in the rear of the band. Almost simultaneously, and as if at a given signal, the fusillade broke out on both sides of the war-path, and a shower of bullets and arrows hurtled upon the Comanches and white men.

By consent of Black-deer Loyal Heart assumed the supreme command. By his orders, the warriors broke up into platoons, and vigorously returned the fire, while retreating to the cross roads, where the enemy could not attack them without discovering themselves; but they had committed the imprudence of marching too fast—the cross roads were still a long way off. The bullets and arrows rained on the Comanches, whose ranks were beginning to be thinned.

Loyal Heart ordered the ranks to be broken, and the men to scatter. The cavalry at once tried to leap the ravines and ditches that bordered the path behind which the Apaches were hidden, but were repulsed by the musketry and long barbed arrows. The Comanches and whites leaped off their horses, being certain of recovering them when wanted, and retreated, sheltering themselves behind trees, only giving way inch by inch, and keeping up a sustained fire with their enemies.

Loyal Heart, so soon as his men reached the clearing, made them form a circle, and they offered an imposing front to the enemy on all sides. Up to this moment the Apaches had maintained silence, not a single war-yell had been uttered, not a rustling of the leaves had been heard. Suddenly the firing ceased, and silence once again brooded over the desert. The hunters and Comanches looked at each other with a surprise mingled with terror. They had fallen into the trap their enemies had laid for them, while fancying they could spoil it.

There was a terrible moment of expectation, whose anxious expression no pen could depict. All at once the conches and chichikouès were heard sounding on the right and left, in the rear and front. At this signal the Apaches rose on all sides, blowing their war-whistles to excite their courage, and uttering fearful yells. The Comanches were surrounded, and nothing was left them but to die bravely at their posts. Loyal Heart and Black-deer, however, had lost none of their calmness; but what was it they expected.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SCALP DANCE.

In every battle there are two terrible moments for the commander who has undertaken the great responsibility of victory: the one, when he gives the signal of attack; the other, when organising the resistance, he calmly awaits the hour when the decisive blow must be dealt in accordance with his previous combinations. Loyal Heart was as calm and quiet as if witnessing an ordinary charge: with flashing eye and haughty lip he recommended his warriors to save their powder and arrows, to keep

together, and meet the charge of the Apaches without yielding an inch. The Comanches uttered their war-yell twice, and then a deadly silence brooded over the clearing.

"Good!" the hunter said, "you are great braves; I am proud of commanding such intrepid warriors."

After this brief address the hunter returned to the centre of the circle, and the whites waited with their finger on the trigger, the red-skins with levelled bows. In the meanwhile the Apaches had quitted their ambuscade, had formed their ranks, and were marching in excellent order on the Comanches. They had also dismounted.

The night had entirely slipped away: by the first beams of day, which tinged the tops of the trees, the black and moving circle could be seen drawing closer and closer round the weak group formed by the Comanches and the adventurers. It was a singular thing in prairie fashions that the Apaches advanced slowly without firing, as if wishing to destroy their enemies at one blow. Tranquil and Loyal Heart shook hands.

"We have five minutes left," said the hunter.

"We shall settle a goodly number before falling ourselves," the Canadian answered.

"All is not over yet," said Loyal Heart.

"Do you hope to get us out of this scrape?"

"I intend," the young man answered, "to destroy this collection of brigands to the last man."

"May Heaven grant it!" the Canadian said.

The Apaches were now but a few yards off, and all the rifles were levelled as if by common agreement.

"Listen!" Loyal Heart muttered in Tranquil's ear.

At the same moment distant yells were heard, and the enemy stopped with alarmed hesitation.

"What is it?" Tranquil asked.

"Our men," the young man answered, laconically.

"The Comanches! the Comanches!" the Apaches shouted.

A sound of horses and fire-arms was heard.

The line that surrounded the little band was suddenly rent asunder, and two hundred Comanche horsemen were seen cutting down and crushing every foe within reach. On perceiving their brothers the horsemen muttered a shout of joy, to which the others enthusiastically responded.

Loyal Heart had calculated exactly; he had not been a second wrong; the warriors ambuscaded by Black-deer to effect a diversion and complete the victory arrived at the decisive moment. This was the secret of the young chief's calmness, although in his heart he was devoured by anxiety. The Apaches, thus taken by surprise, attempted for a few minutes a desperate resistance; but being surrounded and overwhelmed by numbers, fled in all directions. But Black-deer's measures had been taken with great prudence, and a thorough knowledge of the military tactics of the prairies; the Apaches were literally caught between two fires.

Nearly two-thirds of the Apache warriors, placed under the command of Blue-fox to attempt the daring stroke he had conceived, fell, and the rest had great difficulty in escaping. The victory was decisive, and for a long time the Apaches would not dare to measure themselves again with their enemies. Eight hundred horses and nearly five hundred scalps were the trophies of the battle, without counting some thirty wounded. The Comanches had only lost a dozen warriors, and their enemies had been unable to scalp them, which was regarded as a great glory. The horses were collected, the dead and wounded placed on litters, and when all the scalps had been lifted from the Apaches who had succumbed during the fight, their bodies were left to

the wild beasts, and the Comanche warriors, intoxicated with joy and pride, returned to the village.

The return of the expeditionary corps was a perfect triumphant march. Black-deer, to do honour to Loyal Heart and his comrades, whose help had been so useful during the battle, insisted on their marching at the head of the column. The sun rose at the moment when the Comanches emerged from the forest, the day promised to be magnificent. A large crowd could be seen running from the village and hurrying to meet the warriors.

A large band of horsemen soon appeared, armed and painted for war, at their head marching the greatest braves and most respected sachems of the tribe. This band, formed in good order, came up to the sound of conches, drums, chichikouès, and war-whistles, mingled with shouts of joy from the crowd. On coming within a certain distance of each other, the two bands halted, while the crowd fell back to the right and left. Then, at a signal given by Black-deer and the chief commanding the second detachment, a fearful yell burst forth like a clap of thunder, the horsemen dug in their spurs, and the two parties rushed upon one another and began a series of wild evolutions.

When this performance had lasted some time, and a considerable quantity of gun-powder had been expended, the two chiefs gave a signal, and the bands, up to the present commingled, separated, as if by enchantment, and formed up about a pistol-shot from each other. Then, at a signal from Blackbird, the leaders of the two detachments advanced towards each other. The salutations and congratulations then began.

Black-deer was obliged to narrate how the action had been fought, the number of the enemy killed, how many had been scalped. Black-deer performed this duty with the utmost nobility and modesty, giving to Loyal Heart all the merit of the victory, and only allowing himself credit for having punctually carried out the orders of the pale warrior. This modesty in a warrior so renowned as Black-deer greatly pleased the Comanche chiefs.

When all these preliminary ceremonies had been performed, the wives of the chiefs advanced, each leading by the bridle a magnificent steed, destined to take the place of their husband's chargers wearied in action. Black-deer's young and charming squaw led two. After bowing with a gentle smile to her husband, and handing him the bridle of one of the horses, she turned gracefully to Loyal Heart.

"My brother Loyal Heart is a great brave," she said, in a melodious voice; "he will permit his sister to offer him this courser, which is to take the place of the one he has tired in fighting to save his brothers."

All the Indians applauded this gift, so gracefully offered. Black-deer, in spite of his assumed stoicism, could not refrain from evidencing pleasure. Loyal Heart smiled sweetly, dismounted, and walked up to her.

"My sister is fair and kind," he said, as he kissed her on the forehead; "I accept the present she makes me; my brother, Black-deer, is happy in possessing so charming a squaw."

The young wife withdrew, all confused and delighted, among her companions; the chiefs then mounted the fresh horses brought them. Each returned to the head of his detachment, and the two bands advanced slowly towards the village, escorted by the crowd.

The Apache prisoners, on foot and disarmed, marched at the head of the column, guarded by fifty picked warriors. These untameable Indians walked with head erect and haughty demeanour, as if, instead of being interested actors in the scene that was preparing, they were only indifferent spectators.

The procession, compelled to clear its way through a crowd which was momentarily augmented, only advanced slowly.

The day was far spent when it reached the palisade that formed the village defences. At about ten paces from the palisade the two bands stopped. At the entrance of the village stood the master of the great medicine and the hachesto; the hachesto held in his hand the totem of the tribe.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" asked the sorcerer.

"We are," Black-deer answered, "the great braves of the powerful nation of the Antelope Comanches; we ask leave to enter the village with our prisoners, to perform the scalp dance round the stake of torture."

"Good," the sorcerer answered, "I recognise you; you are, indeed, great braves, your hands are red with the blood of our enemies; but," he added, taking a gloomy glance around, "all our warriors are not present."

There was a moment of mournful silence.

"Answer," the sorcerer continued, imperiously; "have you abandoned your brothers?"

"No," Black-deer said, "they are dead, it is true, but their scalps are untouched."

"Good," said the sorcerer; "how many have fallen?"

"Only ten."

"How did they die?"

"Like brave men, with their face turned to their foe."

"Good, the Wacondah has received them into the happy hunting-grounds; have their squaws bewailed them?"

"They are doing so."

The seer frowned.

"Brave men are wept only in tears of blood," he said.

Black-deer fell back a step to make room for the widows.

"We are ready," they said, "if our father will permit us, we will bewail our husbands as they deserve."

"Do so," he answered; "the Master of Life sees it, and he will smile on your grief."

Then these women, arming themselves with knives, cut off several joints of their fingers without uttering a complaint; then, not contented with this sacrifice, they began scarring their faces, arms, and bosoms, so that the blood soon ran down their whole bodies, and they became horrible to look upon. The seer excited and encouraged them by his remarks to give their husbands this proof of their regret, and their exaltation soon attained such a pitch of delirium, that they would eventually have killed themselves, had not the sorcerer checked them. Their companions then approached, took away their weapons, and dragged them off.

"The blood shed by the Apache warriors has been ransomed by the Comanche squaws," said the sorcerer; "the ground is saturated with it; grief can now give way to joy, and my brothers enter their village with heads erect."

Then taking from the hands of the hachesto the totem which the latter had been waving round his head, he stationed himself on the right hand of Black-deer, and entered the village with the warriors, amid the deafening shouts of the crowd.

The procession marched straight to the great square where the scalp dance was to take place. Loyal Heart and his comrades desired to escape this ceremony; but it would have been a great insult to the Indians to do so, and they were compelled to follow the warriors. On passing before the hunter's rancho, they noticed that all the windows were closed. Dona Jesuita, not at all desirous to witness the cruel sight, had shut herself up; but Nô Eusebio, whose nerves were probably harder, was standing in the doorway.

When the whole tribe had assembled on the square, the scalp dance commenced. We have had occasion to describe this ceremony, so we will say nothing of it here, except that, contrary to the other dances, it is performed by the squaws, and that on this occasion it was Black-deer's newly-married wife who led the dance.

The Apache prisoners had been fastened to the stakes; and for some hours they were exposed to the ridicule, jests, and insults of their enemies without displaying any emotion. When the dance ended the time for torture arrived.

We will not dwell on the frightful sufferings inflicted on the wretched men whom their evil destiny had delivered into the hands of their implacable foes, for we have no desire to describe horrible scenes. But that our readers may thoroughly understand what Indian torture is, we will describe the punishment inflicted on one renowned Apache chief.

This chief was a young man of five-and-twenty at the most, of lofty and well-proportioned stature; his features were noble, and his glance stern, and though severely wounded in the action, it was only when literally overwhelmed by numbers, that he had fallen.

The Comanches had admired his heroic conduct, and treated him with a certain degree of respect by order of Black-deer, who entertained a hope of making him renounce his nation, and consent to be adopted by the Comanches. These adoptions are frequent among the red-skins, and it often happens that a warrior who has fallen into the power of his enemies ransoms his life, and escapes torture by marrying the widow of the warrior he has killed.

The Apache chief was called Running-elk. Instead of fastening him to the stake like the warriors of less value, he had been left at liberty. He was leaning his shoulder against the stake with folded arms, and watched calmly and disdainfully all the incidents of the scalp dance. When it was ended, Black-deer, who had previously consulted with the other chiefs of the tribe, and communicated his idea, which they warmly approved of, walked up to him.

"My brother, Running-elk, is a renowned chief," he said; "what is he thinking of?"

"I am thinking," the Apache answered, "that I shall be on the happy hunting-grounds."

"My brother is still very young, his life only counts spring-seasons, does he not regret losing it?"

"Why should I regret it? A man must die."

"Certainly; but dying thus at the stake of torture, when you might have a long future, is hard."

"My brother need say no more," replied the chief; "he is indulging in a hope which will not be realised; Running-elk will not be a renegade to his nation; I could not live among you, for the blood of your warriors I have shed would constantly cry out against me. Could I marry all the squaws whom my tomahawk has rendered widows, or give you back the numerous scalps I have raised? No.

When an Apache and Comanche meet on the war-trail, one must kill the other. Cease then. Invent the most atrocious torture, and I defy you to hear from me a complaint, or even a sigh." And growing more excited as he spoke, he said, "You are children who do not know how to make a man of courage suffer, you need the death of a brave to learn how to die. Try it on me, I despise you; you are cowardly dogs, you can only snarl, and the mere sight of my eagle feather has ever sufficed to put you to flight."

On hearing these words, the Comanches uttered a yell of anger, but Black-deer checked them.

"Running-elk," he said, "is not a real brave, he talks too much; he is a mocking-bird."

The sachem shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"This is the last word you shall hear from me," he said; "you are dogs!"

And biting his tongue off, he spat it into Black-deer's face. The latter gave a leap of fury, and his rage knew no bounds. Running-elk was immediately fastened to

the stake ; the women then tore out the nails from his fingers and toes, and drove into the wounds little spiles of wood dipped in inflammable matter, which they fired. The Indian remained calm ; no contraction of the muscles disturbed the harmony of his features. The punishment endured three hours ; but though his body was one huge wound, the sachem remained perfectly stoical. Blackbird approached in his turn.

Room was made for him ; rushing on the Apache, he plucked out his eyes, which he threw away with disgust, and filled the two bleeding cavities with live coals. This last agony was horrible ; a nervous tremor ran for a second over the wretch's body, but that was all. The Comanche, exasperated by this stoicism, which he could not refrain from admiring, seized him by his long hair, and scalped him, and lashed his face with the blood-dripping scalp. The prisoner was horrible to look on, but still remained erect and unmoved.

Loyal Heart could no longer endure this hideous spectacle ; he dashed through the people in front of him, and blew out his brains. The Comanches, furious at seeing their vengeance slip from them, gave a start, as if about to rush on the white man, who had dared to rob them of their prey.

"Well," said the latter, in a firm voice.

This one word was enough : the wild beasts were muzzled ; they fell back cursing, but did not attempt to make him account for what he had done. The hunter then made a sign to the adventurers to follow him, and they left the square.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MEETING.

We must now go back two months in our narrative, and leaving the deserts of Upper Arkansas for the banks of the Rio Trinidad, return to Cerro Pardo, in the vicinity of Galveston, on the very day of the battle so fatal to the Texans.

We have said that the Jaguar, when he saw the battle irretrievably lost, rushed at full speed to the spot where he had left the cart, in which were Tranquil and Carmela ; that, on reaching it, a frightful spectacle struck his sight ; the cart, half broken, was lying on the ground, surrounded by the majority of his friends, who had bravely fallen in its defence ; but it was empty, and the two persons to whose safety he attached such importance had disappeared. The Jaguar, crushed by this horrible catastrophe, fell senseless to the ground, uttering a loud cry of despair.

The young man remained unconscious for several hours ; but his was a nature which a blow, however terrible it might be, could not destroy thus. At the moment when the sun was disappearing on the horizon on the ocean, and making way for night, the Jaguar opened his eyes. He looked round haggardly, not being yet able to comprehend the position in which he found himself.

But the atmosphere was impregnated by a warm, sickly odour of carnage, and corpses covered the ground. He saw the dark outline of the wild beasts, which darkness drew from their lairs, and which, guided by their sanguinary instinct, were already prowling about the battle-field, preparing for their horrible repast.

"Oh !" the young man exclaimed, "I remember ! What is to be done ?" he added, "whither shall I go ? What has become of my brothers ? in what direction have they fled ? Where shall I find Carmela and Tranquil again ?"

And the young man, crushed by the flood of desperate thoughts that rose from his heart to his brain, sank on a block of rock, and, paying no attention to the wild

beasts, whose roars increased at each second, and grew more menacing with the darkness, he buried his head in his hands.

Two hours passed thus. This man, who had set all his hopes on an idea, who had for several years fought for the realisation of his dream, whose life had been, so to speak, one long self-denial—at the moment when he was about at last to attain that object, pursued with such tenacity, had seen, by a sudden change of fortune, his projects annihilated for ever, perhaps, in a few hours; he had lost everything, and found himself alone on a battle-field, seated amid corpses, and surrounded by wild beasts that watched him. For a moment he had thought of finishing with life, by plunging his dagger into his heart, and not surviving the downfall of his hopes of love and ambition.

"No," he said, casting a glance of defiance around, "I will not let myself be any longer crushed. To work! Liberty is the daughter of Heaven: she is holy, and cannot die."

After uttering these words in a loud voice, with an accent of inspiration, as if desirous of giving those who had fallen a last and supreme consolation, the young man picked up his rifle, and crossed the battle-field, striding over the corpses, and putting to flight the wild beasts, which eagerly got out of his way.

The young man thus passed alone and in the darkness along the road he had traversed by the dazzling sunlight, in the midst of an enthusiastic army, which marched gaily into action, and believed itself sure of victory.

On reaching the end of the plain where the battle had been fought, the Jaguar halted. The moon had risen, and its sickly rays sadly illumined the landscape, to which it imparted a sinister hue. The young man looked around him: in his utter ignorance of the road followed by the fugitives of his party, he hesitated about going along a path where he ran a risk of falling in with a party of Mexicans.

It was a long and difficult journey to the Fort of the Point, and in all probability the victors, if they were not already masters of the fortress, would have invested it, so as to intercept all communication. The Jaguar's perplexity was great; he remained thus for a long time hesitating as to what road he should follow, when suddenly he gave a start. He had seen, some distance off, a faint light gleaming among the trees. The young man tried in vain to determine the direction in which the light was; but, at length, he felt certain that it came from the side where had been the head-quarters of the staff of the Texan army.

The Jaguar persuaded himself that the light he perceived was kindled by fugitives of his party; he believed it the more easily because he desired it, for night was advancing, and he had neither eaten nor drunk during the past day, in which he had been so actively occupied; he began to feel not only exhausted with fatigue, but his physical wants regaining the mastery over his moral apprehension, he felt a degree of hunger and thirst, that reminded him imperiously that he had been fasting for more than fourteen hours.

The Jaguar, without further hesitation, marched resolutely in the direction of the light. The nearer he drew to the rancho, the firmer became his conviction that he had not deceived himself; after deep reflection it seemed to him impossible that the Mexicans could have pushed on so far; still, when he was but a short distance from the house, he judged it prudent to double his precautions, not to let himself be surprised.

On coming within five hundred paces of the rancho, he began to grow restless and have less confidence in the opinion he had formed. Several dead horses, two or three corpses lying pell-mell among pieces of weapons and broken carts, led to the evident supposition that a fight had taken place near the rancho. But with whom had the advantage remained? with the Mexicans or the Texans?

Several times, while the rancho had served as head-quarters of the Texan army,

the Jaguar had gone there either to be present at councils of war, or to take the orders of the commander-in-chief. As the approach to the house was thus familiar to him, he resolved to slip up to a window, and assure himself with his own eyes of what was going on in the rancho.

The light still gleamed, though no sound was heard from the interior, or troubled the deep silence of the night; the Jaguar, without quitting his rifle, which he supposed he might require at any moment, lay down on the ground, and, crawling on his hands and knees, advanced towards the house, being careful to keep in the shadow thrown by the thick branches of the trees; however, he had scarce gone fifteen yards ere he saw, standing out from the white wall of the house, the shadow of a man leaning on a rifle, and motionless as a statue.

The situation was growing complicated; the difficulties increased; for in order to reach the window he wanted, he would be compelled to leave the shadow which had hitherto so fortunately protected him, and enter the white light cast by the moon with a profusion that did not at all please the young man.

The Jaguar felt an enormous inclination to leap on the sentry and throttle him; but supposing it were a friend? The young man really did not know what to do, when suddenly the sentry levelled his rifle in his direction.

"Halloh! my friend, when you have crawled far enough like a mole, I suppose you will get up?"

At the sound of this voice, which he believed he recognised, the young man eagerly leapt to his feet.

"Caramba!" he answered, "you are right, John Davis."

"What!" the latter replied in surprise; "who are you that you know me so well?"

"A friend, *Cuerpo de Cristo!* so raise your rifle."

"A friend, a friend!" the American replied, "that is possible, and the sound of your voice is not unknown to me; but, no matter whether friend or foe, tell me your name."

"Viva Dios!" the young man said with a laugh, "that dear John is always prudent."

"I should hope so, but enough talking; your name, that I may know with whom I have to deal."

"What, do you not recognise the Jaguar?"

"By Heaven!" the American said joyously, "I suspected it was you, but did not dare believe it."

"Why not?" the young man asked as he approached.

"Hang it! because I was assured that you were dead."

"Who the deuce could have told you that nonsense?"

"It is not nonsense. Fray Antonio assured me that he leapt his horse over your body."

The Jaguar reflected for a moment.

"Well," he answered, "he told you the truth."

"What?" the American exclaimed, as he gave a start of terror, "are you dead?"

"Oh, oh! make your mind easy," the young man answered; "I am as good a living man as yourself."

"Are you quite sure of it?" the superstitious American said dubiously.

"*Rayo de Dios!* I am certain of it, though it is possible that Fray Antonio leaped his horse over my body, for I lay for several hours senseless on the battle-field. But what are you doing there?"

"As you see, I am on guard."

"Yes, but why are you so? are there more of you inside?"

"There are about a dozen of us."

"All the better; and who are your comrades?"

The American looked at him for some moments fixedly.

"My friend," he said with emotion, "thank Heaven, for it has shown you a great mercy this day."

"What do you mean?" the young man exclaimed, anxiously.

"I mean that those you confided to us are safe, in spite of the dangers they incurred during this terrible day."

"Can it be true? Oh! I must see them!" he exclaimed, as he prepared to rush to the rancho.

"Wait a moment."

"Why so?" he asked in alarm.

"For two reasons: the first being that before you enter, I must warn them of your arrival."

"That is true; go, my friend, I will await you here."

"I have not yet told you the second reason. Do you not wish to know the name of the man who protected and eventually saved Dona Carmela?"

"I do not understand you, my friend. I entrusted the guardianship of Tranquil and Dona Carmela to you."

"You did so."

"Then, was it not you who saved them?"

"No," the American said, "it was not I; I could only have died with them."

"But who saved them, then?"

"Colonel Melendez."

"Oh! I could have sworn it," the young man said impetuously; "why cannot I thank him?"

"You will soon see him."

"How so?"

"At this moment he is busy seeking a safe retreat for the old hunter and his daughter, and so soon as he has found another shelter, he will himself come to tell us."

"Always kind and devoted! I shall never be able to pay my debt to him."

"Who knows?" the American said, philosophically; "luck will, perhaps, turn for us."

"You are right, my friend; may Heaven grant that it is so; but how did it all happen?"

"The colonel, who seemed, from what he said to me, to have foreboded the danger that Dona Carmela ran, arrived just at the moment when, attacked on all sides at once, and too weak to resist the enemies who overwhelmed us, we were preparing, as we had promised, to die at our post; you can guess the rest."

"Go, now, my friend, I will wait for you."

John Davis, understanding the anxiety from which the young man was suffering, did not let the invitation be repeated, but entered the rancho. In less than ten minutes he returned, and led him forward through a room in which were about a dozen Texans, among them being Fray Antonio, Lanzi, and Quoniam, who were sleeping on trusses of straw laid on boards. He then pushed open a door, and the two men entered a second room not quite so large, and lighted by a smoky candle, standing on a table, which diffused but a dim light. Tranquil was lying on a bed of furs piled on each other, while Dona Carmela was sitting on an equipal by his side.

"Oh!" she cried, as she offered him her hand; "heaven be praised, you have come at last!" And bending down, she offered him her pale forehead, on which the Jaguar imprinted a respectful kiss, the only answer he could find, as he was suffering from such emotion. Tranquil rose with an effort on his couch, and held out his hand to the young man, who hurried up to him.

"Now, whatever may happen," he said timorously, "I am assured as to the fate of my poor child, since you are near me. We have been terribly alarmed."

"Alas!" he answered, "I have suffered more than you."

"But what is the matter?" Carmela exclaimed; "you turn pale and totter: are you wounded?"

"No," he answered feebly; "it is the happiness, the emotion, the joy of seeing you again."

And while saying this, he fell back fainting. Carmela, suffering from the most lively alarm, hurriedly attended to him, but John Davis, knowing better than the maiden what the sick man wanted, seized his gourd, and made him drink a long draught of its contents. The emotion the Jaguar was suffering from, combined with the want of food and the fatigue that oppressed him, had caused him this momentary weakness.

"I fancy, my friend," said Tranquil, "that a good meal is the only remedy you need."

The young man tried to smile as he confessed that, in truth, he was obliged to confess, in spite of the bad opinion Dona Carmela would form of him, that he was literally dying of hunger. The maiden, reassured by this prosaic confession, immediately began getting him a supper of some sort, for provisions were scanty in the rancho, and it was not an easy matter to procure them. However, in a few minutes, Carmela returned with some maize tortillas and a little roast meat, a more than sufficient meal, to which the young man did justice, after apologising to his charming hostess.

The rest of the night was passed in pleasant conversation. The sun had risen an hour, when the sentry suddenly challenged, and several horsemen stopped at the gate of the rancho.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A REACTION.

AFTER the sentry's challenge, loud shouts were raised outside, and, ere long, the noise and confusion attained such proportions that the Jaguar, alarmed and not knowing to what to attribute the disturbance, rose with the intention of going to inquire what was taking place.

At the moment when the Jaguar was about to open the door, it was thrown open, and John Davis rushed into the room, his eyes sparkling like carbuncles; he seemed overpowered by emotion.

"What is the matter?" the Jaguar asked him.

"Come, make haste; you shall see."

"But answer me," the young man continued. "In Heaven's name, what is the matter?"

"Come, I tell you; come, and you will see."

Understanding that it was useless to continue questioning the American, the Jaguar resolved to follow him. When the young man reached the hall, still dragged on by the American, who had not let go his arm, he uttered a shout of joy and dashed forward, after taking a rapid glance around him. Six hundred horsemen at least had halted in front of the rancho. They were Texan fugitives from the battle, and among them were nearly all the comrades of the Jaguar.

It was the sight of his comrades that had drawn a shout of delight from the Jaguar; while they, on perceiving the chief they adored, rushed toward him with yells of delight. They surrounded him and almost overwhelmed him with their noisy and warm protestations of devotion. The young man drew himself up proudly, and tears of joy ran down his eyelids. All was not over yet, then, the cause of liberty was not lost; since so many generous hearts still beat, the victory of the Mexicans, that victory which they had believed complete, was reduced to the proportions of a deed of arms, brilliant, it is true, but without any political import.

All these reflections the Jaguar made in a few seconds; and for him the future, which he had seen an hour previously so sombre and menacing, became suddenly smiling and full of dazzling promises. When the shouts became less loud and order was gradually being re-established, the young chief inquired into the events which had caused their arrival at the rancho.

This is what he learned from Fray Antonio; but as, since his return to honesty, the worthy monk had resumed his monastic habit of prolixity, we will take his place and narrate the facts as briefly as possible.

We have said that on entering the rancho, the Jaguar, while passing through the first room, had perceived, among the sleepers upon the straw, Lanzi, Quóniam, and Fray Antonio. All these men were really sleeping, but with that light sleep peculiar to hunters and wood-rangers, and the sound of the young man's footsteps had aroused them; so soon as they saw the door of the second room close on the American they rose noiselessly, took up their weapons, and stealthily quitted the rancho. They had done this without exchanging a syllable, and were evidently carrying out a plan arranged beforehand, and which the presence of the sentry had alone impeded. Their horses were saddled in a twinkling, they leapt into their saddles, and when John Davis returned to his post they were far out of reach. The American, who immediately perceived their departure, gave a start of passion, and resumed his rounds, growling between his teeth:

"The deuce take them! I only hope they may get a dose of lead in their heads, provided they do not bring a cuadrilla of Mexican lancers down on us."

Still, the plan of these bold rangers was far from meriting such an imprecation, for they were about to accomplish a work of devotion. Ignorant of Colonel Melendez' promises, and having, moreover, no sort of confidence in the well-known puny faith of the Mexicans, they proposed to beat up the country, and assemble all the fugitives of their party they had come across, in order to defend Tranquil and Dona Carmela from any insult.

Fortune, which, according to a well-known proverb, always favours the brave, was far more favourable to the plans of this forlorn hope than they had any right to expect; they had hardly galloped ten miles across country in no settled direction, ere they perceived numerous bivouac fires sparkling through the night in front of a wretched fishing village, situated on the sea shore a little distance from the Fort of the Point.

The Jaguar warmly thanked Fray Antonio; he then stated that the rancho would temporarily be head-quarters, and ordered his men to bivouac round the house.

Presently, Carmela appeared in the door-way. The old hunter, not seeing the Jaguar return, and alarmed by the noisy demonstrations he heard outside, at length resolved to send the girl on a voyage of discovery, after warning her not to commit any act of imprudence, but return to his side at the slightest appearance of danger.

Carmela ran off in delight to find the Jaguar; a few remarks she heard while passing through the house told her what was occurring, and she had no fear about venturing outside. On seeing her the young man checked his hurried walk and waited for her, while trying to give his features an expression agreeing with the rocky situation in which he was supposed to be.

"Well," she said, "what has become of you, deserter? we have been waiting for you with the most lively impatience, and there you are walking quietly up and down, instead of hurrying to bring us good news promised us."

"Forgive me, Carmela," he replied; "I was wrong to appear thus to forget you, and leave you in a state of anxiety; but so many extraordinary things have occurred, that I do not really yet know whether I am awake or dreaming."

"Everybody deserts us this morning, not excepting Lanzi and Quoniam, who have not yet made their appearance."

"I trust they will soon return, and directly they do so, I will send them to you."

"But are you not coming in, Jaguar?"

"I should like to do so, Carmela, but at this moment it is impossible; remember that the army is utterly disorganised, at each moment fresh men who have escaped from the battle join us; only a few chiefs have turned up as yet, the rest are missing. But be assured that so soon as I have a second to myself, I will take advantage of it to join you. Alas! it is only by your side that I am happy."

The maiden blushed slightly at this insinuation, and answered at once with a degree of coldness in her accent, of which she immediately repented.

"You are at liberty to remain here as long as you please, caballero; in speaking to you as I did I merely carried a message my father gave me for you; the rest concerns me but little."

The young man bowed without replying, and turned away his head not to let the girl see the sorrow she caused him. Carmela walked a few steps toward the house, but on reaching the threshold she ran back and offered her little hand to the young chief.

"Forgive me, my friend," she said to him, "I am a madcap. You are not angry with me, I trust?"

"I angry with you?" he replied, sadly, "why should I be so, by what right? what else am I to you than a stranger?"

The maiden bit her lips angrily.

"Will you not take the hand I offer you?" she said.

The Jaguar looked at her for a moment, and then seized her hand, on which he imprinted a burning kiss.

"Why should the head ever do injustice to the heart?" he said with a sigh.

"Am I not a woman?" she replied; "we are waiting for you, so come soon," she added, and ran back into the house like a startled fawn, and laughing like a madcap.

The Jaguar gazed after her until she at length disappeared in the interior of the rancho.

"She is but a coquettish child," he murmured in a low voice; "has she a heart?"

A stifled sigh was the sole answer he found for the difficult question he asked himself, and he bent his eyes again on the sea. Suddenly, he uttered a cry of joy; he had just seen, above the rocks which terminated on the right the small bay on which the *cuadrilla* was encamped, the tall masts of the *Libertad* corvette, followed or rather convoyed by the brig. The two ships, impelled by a favourable breeze, soon doubled the point, and entered the bay. A boat was immediately let down, several persons seated themselves in it, and the sailors, letting their oars fall simultaneously into the water, pulled vigorously for the shore.

The distance they had to row was nearly half a mile, and hence the Jaguar was unable to recognise the persons who were arriving. Anxious to know, however, what he had to depend on, he mounted the first horse he came across, and galloped toward the boat, followed by some twenty freebooters. The young man reached the coast at the precise moment when the bows of the boat ran up into the sand. There were three sailors in the boat: Captain Johnson and the person we have met

before under the name of El Alferez, and lastly, Lanzi. On perceiving the latter, the young chief could not restrain a shout of joy.

"Bravo, caballero!" said the captain; "by Heaven! you do right to press that man's hand, for he is a loyal and devoted fellow; ten times during the past night he risked his life in trying to reach my ship, which he at length came aboard, half dead with fatigue."

"Nonsense," the half-breed said; "it was nothing at all; the main point was to reach you, as my poor comrades had the ill-luck to be taken prisoners."

"Don't be alarmed, my brave fellow," the Jaguar said; "your comrades are as free as yourself, and you will soon see them."

The Jaguar then offered the captain and his two companions horses on which they could proceed to the rancho, and which they accepted.

While galloping along, the three new comers looked about them with surprise, not at all comprehending what they saw; for a time, the Jaguar paid no great attention to their manoeuvres, and continued to talk about indifferent topics; but their pre-occupation soon became so marked that he perceived it, and could not refrain from asking them the cause of it.

"On my word, caballeros," the captain said, all at once taking the ball at the rebound; "if you had not asked me that question, I was on the point of asking you one, for I frankly confess that I understand nothing of what is happening to us."

"What is happening, pray?"

"Why, I learned last night from this worthy lad the frightful defeat you experienced yesterday; the total loss and the utter dispersion of your army; I hurried up to offer you and yours, whom I supposed tracked like wild beasts and without shelter of any sort, an asylum aboard my vessel, and I have barely set foot on land, ere I find myself in the midst of an army. Explain to me, I beg, the meaning of this riddle, for I have really given it up, as impossible to guess."

"I am ready to satisfy your curiosity," the Jaguar answered with a smile; "but first of all I crave some valuable news from you. Is the Fort of the Point still in the hands of our friends?"

"Yes; our ships have left it an hour at the most."

"May Heaven be praised!" the young man exclaimed impetuously; "nothing is lost in that case; and all can be repaired. Yes, captain, we have been beaten, we have suffered a frightful defeat; but, as you know, during the ten years we have been struggling against the Mexican power, our oppressors have often believed us crushed; but our cause is sacred; we are the soldiers of an idea, and must conquer. The defeat of yesterday will be of use to us in the future."

"You are right, my friend," the captain answered warmly. "This revolution in truth resembles no other; ever conquered, and ever up in arms, you are stronger to-day, after your numerous defeats, than when you began the struggle. Hence your losses are limited to men and arms."

"To men and arms solely; we have not lost an inch of ground."

"Many of our chiefs, I presume, have fallen, or are in the hands of the enemy?"

"I fear so; still, several have already come in, and others will probably still join us. There is one, unfortunately, about whom we have no news—you know to whom I refer; if the day pass without his making his appearance, I shall start in search of him."

The Jaguar had spoken the truth; each moment soldiers who had escaped from the battle-field arrived. During the short hour that had elapsed since he left the rancho, more than two hundred had joined the camp.

"You see," said the young chief, looking around him proudly, "that, in spite of our defeat, we have retained our head-quarters, and the banner of Texan independence still floats from its azotea."

The horsemen then dismounted, and entered the rancho.

CHAPTER XIX.

A PAGE OF HISTORY.

THE Jaguar was mistaken, or rather flattered himself, when he said that the defeat of Cerro Pardo had caused but an insignificant loss to the revolutionary party; for Galveston, too weak to attempt resistance to the attack of the Mexican army, surrendered on the first summons.

We must go back once again, and return to General Rubio, at the moment when the Texans, broken by Colonel Melendez's charge, and understanding that victory was hopelessly slipping from their grasp, began flying in every direction. The general had stationed himself on an eminence, whence he surveyed the whole battlefield, and followed the movements of the various corps engaged. So soon as he saw the disorder produced in the enemy's ranks, he understood the advantage he could derive from this precipitate flight, by closely pursuing the fugitives up to the Fort of the Point, where he could certainly enter pell-mell without striking a blow.

The general turned to an aide-de-camp by his side, and was just going to send Colonel Melendez orders to start all his cavalry in pursuit of the Texans, when a platoon of a dozen lancers suddenly appeared, commanded by an officer who galloped at full speed to the spot where the general was. The general looked in surprise at this officer, who did not belong to his army. A minute later he gave a start of surprise and disappointment, and took a sorrowful glance at the battle-field.

"Confound this chamber-officer! Why did he not remain in Mexico? What does the president mean by sending us this gold-plumaged springaid, to make us lose all the profits of the victory?"

At this moment the officer came up to the general, bowed respectfully, drew a large sealed envelope from his breast, and handed it to him. The general coldly returned the salutation, took the letter, and opened it.

"You are the aide-de-camp of the president general of the republic?" he said roughly.

"Yes, general," the officer answered, with a bow.

"Hum! Where is the president at this moment?"

"Four leagues off, with two thousand men."

"Where has he halted?"

"His excellency has not halted, general, but, on the contrary, is advancing by forced marches."

The general gave a start of anger.

"It is well," he continued, presently. "Return at full gallop to his excellency, and announce to him my speedy arrival."

"Pardon me, general, but it seems to me that you have not read the despatch," the officer said respectfully.

The general looked at him askance.

"I have not time at this moment to read the despatch," he said drily.

"I am very unfortunate, general, poor subaltern as I am, to find myself thus placed, against my will, under the alternative of failing in my duty or incurring your displeasure."

The general remained silent for a moment; then he became calm again, and said—

"I was wrong. Forgive me, caballero; but I was not master of a burst of anger. A man cannot be thus deprived, by a caprice, of the fruit of a thousand fatigues, and not feel a certain amount of displeasure. Go and announce to his

excellency that, not knowing his wishes, I fought the battle, but that, in obedience to his orders, I stopped it at the first word you said to me."

The general bowed to his horse's neck, and burying his spurs in the flanks of his noble animal, started at a gallop, followed by his escort. The general, a moment previously so proud and glad, let his head fall on his chest in despair.

"Oh!" he muttered, "such a splendid battle and so well managed!"

In the meanwhile the officers collected round the general, and loudly asked him for authority to pursue the conquest. The general raised his head.

"Order the retreat to be sounded!" he said.

The aides-de-camp looked at him with amazement.

"Yes," the general went on, "sound the retreat. The army," he added, with a bitter smile, "will return to its first position, as is ordered by his Excellency Santa Anna, president of the republic. I am no longer your chief."

The officers and aides-de-camp who surrounded the general, sharing in their chief's sorrow, lowered their heads, blushing with shame and anger, and at a final order from the general, prepared to execute his wishes, though much against the grain. Order was re-established, and the Mexican army fell back on the positions they had left in the morning to commence the action, and lit their camp-fires.

At about eight in the evening Santa Anna effected his junction with General Rubio. The president of the republic, after saluting the general, took over the command, and then withdrew to his head-quarters.

At the period when our history takes place, General Don Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna was thirty-nine to forty years of age; he was tall and finely built; he had a lofty and projecting forehead, rounded chin, and slightly aquiline nose, large black eyes, full of expression, and a flexible mouth, which gave him an air of remarkable nobility, while his black and curly hair, which formed a contrast to the yellowish tinge of his complexion, covered his temples and his high-boned cheeks. Such, physically, was the man who, for thirty years, had been the evil genius of Mexico, and had led it to infallible ruin.

As we have already said, Texas had now reached a decisive epoch; unfortunately her future seemed as gloomy as that of the conquered: in spite of the heroic efforts attempted by the insurgents, the rapid progress of the invasion was watched with terror, and no possible means of resistance could be seen. Still it was this moment, when all appeared desperate, which the convention, calm and moved by a love of liberty more ardent than ever, selected to hurl a last and supreme defiance at the invaders. Not allowing itself to be intimidated by evil fortune, the convention replied to the menaces of the conquerors by a statement of rights, and the definitive declaration of the independence of a country which was almost entirely occupied by, and in the power of, the Mexicans. It improvised a constitution, created a provisional authority, decreed all the measures of urgency which the gravity of circumstances demanded, and finally nominated General Sam Houston, commander-in-chief, with the most widely extended powers.

Unhappily the Texan army no longer existed. But if military organisation might be lacking, the enthusiasm was more ardent than ever. The Texans had sworn to bury themselves under the smoking ruins of their plundered towns and villages sooner than return beneath the detested yoke of their oppressors. And this oath they were prepared to keep.

General Houston had scarce been appointed ere he prepared to obey, and he reached the banks of the Guadalupe. The Texan troops amounted to *three hundred* men, badly armed, badly clothed, almost dying of hunger, but burning to take their revenge. General Houston was a stern and sincere patriot; his name is revered in Texas, like that of Washington in the United States, or of Lafayette in France. At the sight of this army of three hundred men, Houston was not discouraged.

Still, it was not with these three hundred men, however brave and resolute they might be, that General Houston could entertain a hope of defeating the Mexicans, who, rendered presumptuous by their past successes, eagerly sought the opportunity to finish once for all with the insurgents. General Houston, before risking an action on which the fate of his new country would doubtless depend, resolved to form an army; for this purpose, instead of marching on the enemy, he fell back on the Colorado, and thence on the Brazos, burning and destroying everything in his passage, in order to starve the Mexicans out.

These clever tactics obtained all the success the general expected from them; for a very simple reason: as he fell back on the Mexican frontier, his army was daily augmented by fresh recruits, who, on the report of his approach, left their houses or farms to enlist under his banner; while the contrary happened to the Mexicans, who at each march they made in pursuit of the insurgents, left a few laggards behind.

Such was the state of affairs between Houston and Santa Anna on the day when we resume our narrative. It was about eight in the evening, the heat had been stifling throughout the day, and although night had fallen long before, this heat, far from diminishing, had but increased; there was not a breath of air, the atmosphere was oppressive, and low lightning-laden clouds rolled heavily athwart the sky; all, in fact, foreboded a storm.

On the banks of a rather wide stream, whose yellowish and turbid waters flowed mournfully between banks clothed with cotton-wood trees, the bivouac-fires of a small detachment of cavalry might be seen glistening like stars in the darkness. This stream was a confluent of the Colorado, and the men encamped on its banks were Texans. They were but twenty-five in number, and composed the entire cavalry of the army of independence; they were commanded by the Jaguar.

While the horsemen were sadly crouching over the fires, not far from which their horses were hobbled, and conversing in a low voice, their chief, who had retired to a jadal made of branches and lighted by a smoky candle, was sitting on an equial with his back leant against a tree-trunk, with his arms folded on his chest, and gazing at vacancy. The Jaguar was no longer the young and ardent man we introduced to our readers; his face was pale, his features contracted, and eyes bloodshot with fever, and, though faith still dwelt in his heart, hope was dead.

The truth was that death had begun to make frightful gaps around him; his dearest friends, the most devoted supporters of the cause he defended, had fallen one after the other in this implacable struggle. El Alferéz, Captain Johnson, Ramirez, Fray Antonio, were lying in their bloody graves; of others he received no news, nor knew what had become of them.

General Houston, in his retreat, had confided the command of the rear-guard to the Jaguar; a post he had accepted with gloomy joy, as he felt sure that he would fall gloriously.

In the meantime the night became blacker and blacker, the horizon more menacing; a white and sharp rain began piercing the grey fog; the storm was rapidly approaching, and must soon burst forth. The men watched with terror the progress of the storm, and instinctively sought shelter against this convulsion of nature, which was far more terrible than the other dangers which menaced them. No one, who has not witnessed it, can form even a remote idea of an American hurricane, which twists trees like wisps of straw, fires forests, levels mountains, drives streams from their bed, and in a few hours convulses nature.

Suddenly a dazzling flash furrowed the darkness, and a crashing burst of thunder broke the majestic silence that brooded over the landscape. At the same instant the sentry stationed a few paces in front of the bivouac challenged. The Jaguar sprang up as if he had received an electric shock, and bounding forward, listened. The dull sound of horses' hoofs could be heard on the soddened ground.

"Who's there?" the sentry challenged a second time.

"Friends," a voice replied.

"To arms!" shouted the Jaguar; "we must not let ourselves be surprised."

"Come, come," the voice continued, "I see that I am right, since I can hear the Jaguar."

"Halloh!" the latter said in surprise, "who are you, that you know me so well?"

"By Jove! a friend whose voice should be familiar."

"John Davis!" the young man said, with a joy he did not attempt to conceal.

"All right!" the American continued gaily. "I thought that we should understand one another presently."

"Come, come; let him pass, men, he is a friend."

Five or six horsemen entered the camp and dismounted.

At this moment the storm burst forth furiously, passing like a whirlwind over the plain, the twisted trees on which were in a second uprooted and borne away by the hurricane.

For nearly three hours the hurricane raged, levelling everything in its passage; at length, at about one in the morning, the rain became less dense, the wind gradually calmed, the thunder rolled at longer intervals, and the sky, swept clean by a final effort of the tempest, appeared again blue and star-spangled; the hurricane had gone away to vent its fury in other regions. The men and horses rose; all breathed again, and tried to restore a little order in camp. This was no easy task, for the jacal had been carried away, the fires extinguished, and the logs dispersed in all directions; but the Texans were tried men, long accustomed to the dangers and fatigues of desert life.

They set gaily to work, and in two hours all the injury caused by the tempest was repaired as well as the precarious resources they had at their disposal permitted; the fires were lighted again, and the jacal reconstructed. Any stranger who had entered the camp at this moment would not have supposed that so short a time previously they had been assailed by so fearful a hurricane. The Jaguar was anxious to talk with John Davis, whom he had only seen since his arrival, and had found it impossible to exchange a syllable. When order was restored he went up to him.

"Permit me," the American said, "to bring with me three of my comrades whom I am convinced you will be delighted to meet."

"Do so," the Jaguar answered; "who are they?"

"I will not deprive you," Davis said, with a smile, "of the pleasure of recognising them yourself."

The young chief did not press the matter. A few minutes later, according to his promise, Davis entered the camp with his comrades; the Jaguar gave a start of joy at seeing them, and quickly walked up to offer his hand. These three men were Lanzi, Quoniam, and Black-deer.

"Oh, oh!" he exclaimed, "here you are then. Heaven be praised! I did not dare hope for your return."

"Why not?" Lanzi asked; "as we are still alive, thanks to God! you ought to have expected us."

"So many things have happened since our parting, so many misfortunes have assailed us, so many of our friends have fallen, I thought you might also be dead."

"You know, my friend," the American said, "that we have been absent a very long time, and are quite ignorant of what has happened since our departure."

"Where is Tranquil?"

"Only a few leagues from here; he sent me forward to warn you of his speedy arrival."

"Thanks," the young man replied, pensively.

"Is that all you desire to know?"

"Nearly so, for of course you have received no news of——"

"News of whom?" the American asked, seeing that the Jaguar hesitated.

"Of Carmela?" he at length said, with a tremendous effort.

"Of Carmela?" John Davis exclaimed, in surprise: "how could we have received any news? Tranquil, on the contrary, hopes to hear some from you."

"From me?"

"Hang it! you must know better than any of us how the dear child is."

"I do not understand you."

"And yet it is very clear. I will merely remind you that on the very day when Tranquil and I, by your express orders, started to join Loyal Heart, the maiden was confided in your presence to Captain Johnson, who would convey her to the house of a respectable lady at Galveston."

"Yes, I knew all that, so it was useless to tell me. What I ask you is, whether, since Carmela went to Galveston, you have received any news of her?"

"Why, it is impossible, my friend; how could we have received any?"

"That is true," the young man replied, disconsolately; "I am mad. Forgive me."

"What is the matter? why this pallor, my friend, this restlessness I see in your eyes?"

"Ah!" he said, with a sigh, "it is because I have received news of Carmela, if you have not."

"You, my friend?"

"Yesterday evening," he said, with a bitter smile.

"I do not at all understand you."

"Well, listen to me. What I am going to tell you is not long, but it is important, I promise you."

"I am listening."

"We form, as you are doubtless aware, the extreme rear-guard of the army of liberation."

"Yes, I know that, and it helped me in finding your trail."

"Very good; hence, hardly a day passes in which we do not exchange musket-shots with the Mexicans."

"Go on."

"Yesterday we were suddenly charged by forty Mexican horse; it was about three in the afternoon, when General Houston was crossing the river with the main body. We had orders to offer a desperate resistance, in order to protect the retreat. This order was needless; at the sight of the Mexicans we rushed madly upon them, and the action at once commenced. After a few minutes' fighting the Mexicans gave way, and finally fled. Too weak to pursue the enemy, I had given my soldiers orders to return, when two Mexicans, instead of continuing their flight, stopped, and fastening their handkerchiefs to their sabre-blades, made me a signal that they desired to parley. I approached the two men, who bore a great likeness to bandits; and one of them, a man of tall stature and furious looks, said to me at once, when I asked them what they wanted—

"To do you a service, if you are, as I suppose, the Jaguar."

"Yes, I am he," I answered, "but who are you?"

"It is of little consequence who I am, provided that my intentions are good."

"Still, I must know them."

"Hum!" he said, "you are very distrustful."

"Come, Sandoval," the other horseman said, "do not beat about thus, but finish your business."

"I ask nothing better than to finish," he replied. "In a word, caballero, here is a paper which a person in whom you take a great interest requested us to deliver to you."

"I eagerly seized the paper, and prepared to open it.

"No," the Mexican continued eagerly, "wait till you have joined your men again to read that letter."

"I consent," I said, "but I presume you do not intend to do me a gratuitous service, whatever its nature may be?"

"Why so?"

"Because you do not know me, and the interest you take in me must be very slight."

"Perhaps so," the rider said; "still, pledge yourself to nothing till you know the contents of that letter."

"Then he made a signal to his comrade, and, after bowing slightly, they started at a gallop, and left me considerably embarrassed at the way in which this singular interview had ended, and twisting in my fingers the letter I did not dare open."

"Well," the American muttered, "what did you when they left you?"

"I looked after them a long time, and then suddenly recalled to my duty by several carbine-shots whizzing past my ears, I galloped off at full speed."

"On reaching the bivouac I opened the letter. It was from Carmela!"

"By heavens!" the American said, as he clapped his thigh, "I would have wagered it."

CHAPTER XX.

SANDOVAL.

"Yes," the Jaguar continued, "this letter was in Carmela's handwriting. Would you like to know the contents?"

The American looked around him.

"Well, what matter?" the Jaguar exclaimed with some violence; "are not these brave lads our friends, faithful and devoted friends? why keep secret from them a thing I should be forced to tell them, perhaps, to-morrow?"

John Davis bowed.

"You did not understand my thought," he said. "I am not afraid about them, but of those who may be possibly listening outside."

The young man shook his head.

"No, no," he said, "fear nothing, John Davis, my old friend; no one is listening to us."

"Read the letter in that case, for I am anxious to know its contents."

The Jaguar, after a moment's hesitation, drew from the pocket of his velvet jacket a dirty and crumpled piece of paper, and read:

"To the Chief of the Texan Freebooters, surnamed the Jaguar.

"If you really take that interest in me you have so often offered to prove to me, save me, save the daughter of your friend! Having left Galveston to go in search of my father, I have fallen into the hands of my most cruel enemy. I have only hope in two men in this world, yourself and Colonel Melendez. My father is too far for me to be allowed to hope for assistance from him. And besides, his life is too precious to me for me to consent to him risking it. Whatever may happen, I trust in you; will you fail me?"

"The disconsolate CARMELA."

"Hum!" the American muttered; "is that all?"

"No," the young man answered, "there is a second note written below the first."

The Jaguar took up the paper again and read:

"This letter, written in duplicate, is addressed by Dona Carmela to two persons—Senor El Jaguar and Colonel Melendez; but the second copy has not yet been delivered, as I am awaiting the Jaguar's answer ere doing so. It depends on him not only to save a young lady, interesting in every respect, but also, if he will, to secure the triumph of the cause for which he is combating so valiantly. For this purpose, he has only an easy thing to do: he will proceed, between eight and nine o'clock in the morning, to the Cueva del Venado. A man will issue from the grotto, and tell him on what conditions he consents to aid him in his double enterprise."

The Jaguar folded up the paper, and placed it in his jacket pocket.

"Is that all?" the American again asked.

"This time, yes, it is all," the young man answered; "now what do you think of this epistle?"

"Why, I think that the man who wrote it is the man who handed you the letter."

"I think so too; but what ought I to do?"

"Ah, that is a more difficult question than the first; the case is serious."

"Remember that it concerns Carmela."

"I am well aware of it. But reflect that this rendezvous may conceal a snare."

"For what object?"

"Why, to seize you."

"Well, and what then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, supposing that it is a trap, what will be the result of it?"

"In the first place that you will be a prisoner, and Texas be deprived of one of her most devoted defenders. In short, in your place I would not go; that is my brief and candid opinion. And," turning to his auditors, "and you, senores, what do you think of it?"

"It would be madness for the Jaguar to trust a man he does not know," said Lanzi.

"He must remain here," added Quoniam.

"The antelope is the wildest of animals, and yet its instinct makes it escape the hunters," the Comanche chief said sententiously; "my brother will remain here."

The Jaguar walked up and down the jacal with visible annoyance and febrile impatience.

"No," he said, as he suddenly stopped; "no, I will not abandon Dona Carmela when she claims my assistance, for it would be an act of cowardice; I shall go to the Cueva del Venado."

"You will reflect, my friend," John Davis remarked.

"My reflections are all made; I will save Dona Carmela, even at the risk of my life."

"You will not do that, my friend," the American continued gently.

"Why shall I not?"

"Because honour forbids you; because, besides the heart, there is duty; besides private feelings, public interests. Stationed at the rear-guard, you are responsible for the safety of the army; and if you are killed or made prisoner, the army is perhaps lost."

The Jaguar let his head droop, and sank quite crushed into an equipal.

"What is to be done? my God, what is to be done?"

"Hope," John Davis continued, looking upon the chief with an assuring glance.

"Jaguar, my friend, my brother, is it for me to restore your courage—you, a man with a lion's heart, and so strong in battle; whom adversity has never forced to bow

his head? Do you dare to place your love for a woman and your devotion to the country on the same level? Do you dare to lament your lost love Carmela, a prisoner, or even dead, when your native land is succumbing beneath the repeated blows of its oppressors? The general welfare must put down all paltry or selfish passions. To hesitate is to act as a traitor. Up, brother, and do not dishonour yourself by a cowardly weakness!"

The young man started up as if a serpent had stung him on hearing these harsh words; but he suddenly subdued the wild flash of his eye, while a sad smile covered his handsome face like a winding-sheet.

"Thanks, brother," he replied, as he seized John Davis's hand, "thanks for having reminded me of my duty. I will die at my post."

"There you are again," the American exclaimed joyfully. "I felt certain that your heart would not remain deaf to the call of duty."

The young man heaved a deep sigh; but he did not feel within him the strength to respond to the praise. At this moment the clang of arms and the sound of horses was audible without.

"What is the matter now?" the Jaguar asked.

"I do not know," the American answered; "but I fancy that we shall soon be informed."

In fact, the sentry had challenged; and, after an apparently satisfactory reply, a horseman entered the camp.

"A flag of truce," Lanzi said, appearing in the doorway of the jacal.

"A flag of truce!" the Jaguar repeated.

"Perhaps it is the help you expect from heaven, and which has been sent you," the American answered.

The young man smiled incredulously, but turned to Lanzi and said,

"Let him enter."

"Come, señor," said the half-breed, addressing a person who was still invisible; "the commandant is ready to receive you."

Lanzi fell back, and made room for an individual who at once entered. The Jaguar started on recognising him. It was Sandoval, who had delivered him the letter on the previous day.

"You are surprised to see me, I think, caballeros," he said, with a smile to the Jaguar.

"I confess it," the latter said, with a bow no less polite than the one made to him.

"The matter is clear enough, however. I like a plain and distinct understanding. In the letter I delivered to you myself yesterday, I gave you the meeting at the Cueva del Venado, to discuss grave matters, as you will remember."

"I allow it."

"But," Sandoval continued, "we had hardly separated ere I made a reflection."

"Ah! and would it be indiscreet to ask its nature?"

"Not at all. I reflected that, under the circumstances, regarding the position in which we stand to each other, and as I had not the honour of your acquaintance, it might possibly happen that you would not place in me all the confidence I deserve."

The two insurgents exchanged a smiling glance, which Sandoval intercepted.

"Ah, ah!" he said, with a laugh; "it appears that I guessed right. In short, as we have serious matters to discuss, I resolved to come direct to you."

"You did well, and I thank you for it."

"It is not worth while, for I am working as much for myself as for you in this business."

"Be it so; but that does not render your conduct less honourable. Then you are not a flag of truce?"

"I! not a bit in the world."

"No matter ; so long as you remain with us you shall be treated as such, so do not feel alarmed."

"I alarmed ! about what, pray ? Am I not under the safeguard of your honour ?"

"Thanks for your good opinion. Now, if you think proper, we will come to the point."

"I ask nothing better," Sandoval answered, with some hesitation, and looking dubiously at the American.

"This caballero is my intimate friend," the Jaguar said, "you can speak before him."

"Hum !" said Sandoval, with a toss of the head. "My mother always told me that when two are enough to settle a matter, it is useless to call in a third."

"Your mother was right, my fine fellow," John Davis said, with a laugh ; "and since you are so unwilling to have me as an auditor, I will retire."

"It is perfectly indifferent to me whether you hear me or not," Sandoval said, carelessly ; "I only said so for the sake of *senor*."

"If that be really your sole motive," the Jaguar continued, "you can speak, for I repeat to you I have no secrets from this caballero."

"All right then," said Sandoval.

"Senores," said the pirate, puffing out a large quantity of smoke from his mouth and nostrils, "it is as well for you to know that I am the recognised chief of a numerous and brave band of banished men, or proscripts, whichever you may call them, whom the honest townfolk fancied they branded by calling them Skimmers of the Savannah, or pirates of the prairies."

At this strange revelation, made with such cool cynicism, the two men gave a start and regarded each other with considerable surprise.

"I have reasons that you should know my social position," continued the pirate, "for you to understand what is going to follow."

"Good," John Davis interrupted ; "but what motive urged you to take the present step ?"

"Two important reasons," Sandoval answered, distinctly ; "the first is, that I wish to avenge myself ; the second, the desire of gaining a large sum of money by selling you in the first battle, for the highest price I can obtain, the co-operation of the *cuadrilla* I have the honour to command, a *cuadrilla* composed of thirty well-armed men."

"Now go on, but be brief, for time presses."

"Do not be frightened, I am not fond of chattering ; how much do you offer me for my *cuadrilla* ?"

"I cannot personally make a bargain with you," the Jaguar said ; "I must refer the matter to the general-in-chief."

"That is perfectly true."

"Still, you can tell me the price you ask ; I will submit it to the general and he will decide."

"Very good ; you will give me fifty thousand piastres, half down, the rest after the battle is won. You see that I am not exorbitant in my demands."

"Your price is reasonable ; but how can we communicate ?"

"Nothing is easier ; when you desire to speak to me you will fasten red pendants to the lances of your cavalry, and I will do the same when I have any important communication to make to you."

"That is settled ; now for the other matter."

"It is this : one day a monk of the name of Fray Antonio sent me a wounded man."

"The White Scalper!" John Davis exclaimed.

"Do you know him?" the pirate asked.

"Yes, but go on."

"He is a pretty scamp, I think."

"I am quite of your opinion."

"Well, I greeted him as a brother and gave him the best I had; do you know what he did?"

"On my word, I do not."

"He tried to debauch my comrades and supplant me."

"Oh, oh! that was rather strong."

"Was it not? Fortunately I was watching, and managed to parry the blow; about this time General Santa Anna offered to engage us as a free corps."

"Oh!" the Jaguar uttered, in disgust.

"It was not very tempting," the pirate continued, "but I had an idea."

"What was it?"

"The one I had the honour of explaining to you a moment back."

"Ah! very good."

"Hence, I selected thirty resolute men from my band and started to join the Mexican army; of course, you understand, I was paid."

"Of course, nothing could be more fair."

"I was careful to bring this demon of a man with me; I did not care to leave him behind."

"I should think so."

"We went on very quietly till a day or two back, when, in beating up the country, I captured a girl, who, only escorted by three men, who fled like cowards at the first shot, was trying to join the Texan army."

"Poor Carmela!" the Jaguar murmured.

"Do not pity her, but rejoice that she fell into my hands: who knows what might have happened?"

"That is true, go on."

"I was willing enough to let the poor girl continue her journey, but the Scalper opposed it. It seemed that he knew her, for on seeing her he exclaimed—'Oh, oh! this time she shall not escape me;' is that clear, eh?"

The two men bowed their assent.

"However, the prisoner was mine."

"Ah!" said the Jaguar, with a sigh of relief.

"Yes, and I would not consent to surrender her to the Scalper at any price."

"Good, very good! you are a worthy man."

The pirate smiled modestly.

"Yes," he said, "I am all right, but my comrade offered me a bargain."

"What was its nature?"

"To give me twenty-five gold onzas, on condition that I never restored my prisoner to liberty."

"And did you accept?" the Jaguar asked, eagerly.

"Hang it! business is business, and twenty ounces are a tidy sum."

"Villain!" the young man exclaimed.

John Davis restrained him, and made him sit down.

"Patience," he said.

"Hum!" Sandoval muttered, "you are deucedly quick; I allow that I promised not to set her at liberty, but not to prevent her flight; did I not tell you that I was a man of ideas?"

"That is true."

"The girl interested me: she wept. It is very foolish, but I do not like to see women cry since the day when—but that is not the point; she told me her name and story; I was affected in spite of myself, and the more so, as I saw a prospect of taking my revenge."

"Then you propose to me to carry her off?"

"That's the very thing."

"How much do you want for that?"

"Nothing," the pirate answered.

"How, nothing?"

"Dear me, no."

"That is impossible."

"It is so, however, though I will propose two conditions."

"Ah! ah! there we have it."

The pirate smiled in reply.

"Let us hear them," the young man continued.

"In order not to compromise myself unnecessarily, you will carry off the girl during the first battle, when I come over to your side. Do not be frightened: it will not be long first, if I may believe certain forebodings."

"Good, that is granted. Now for the second."

"The second is, that you swear to free me from the White Scalper, and kill him, no matter in what way."

"Done again—I swear it. But now one question."

"Out with it."

"How is it that as you hate this man so deeply, you have not killed him yourself, as there could have been no lack of opportunity?"

"Certainly not; I could have done it a hundred times."

"Well, why did you not do it?"

"Are you desirous of knowing?"

"Yes."

"Well, it was because the man has been my guest and slept under my roof by my side, eaten and drank at my table; but what is not permitted me to do, others can do in my place. But now good-bye, senores; when will you give me a definite answer?"

"This very evening; I shall have seen the general in a few hours."

"This evening, then."

And bowing politely to the two men, he quietly left the jacal, mounted his horse, and set out at a gallop, leaving the two men terrified at his imperturbable effrontery and profound perversity.

CHAPTER XXI.

LOYAL HEART'S HISTORY.

AFTER the scene of torture we described a few chapters back, Loyal Heart returned to his rancho with his friends, Tranquil, Lanzi, and the faithful Quoniam. Fray Antonio had left the village the same morning to convey to the Jaguar the news of the good reception given his companions by the Comanches. The whites sat down sorrowfully on equipals, and remained silent for some minutes. The horrible tortures inflicted on Running Elk had affected them more than they liked to say.

"Hum!" Quoniam muttered, "the red race is a brutal race."

"All races are the same," Tranquil answered, "when abandoned without restraint to their passions."

"The whites are men more cruel than the red-skins," Loyal Heart observed, "because they act with discernment."

"That is true," John Davis struck in, "but that does not prevent the scene we have just witnessed being a horrible one."

"Yes," said Tranquil, "horrible is the word."

"Come," Loyal Heart remarked, for the purpose of changing the conversation, "did you not tell me, my friend, that you were entrusted with a message for me? I fancy the moment has arrived for an explanation."

"In truth, I have delayed too long in delivering it; besides, if my presentiments do not greatly deceive me, my return must be anxiously expected."

"Good! speak, nobody will disturb you; we have all the time necessary before us."

"Oh, what I have to say to you will not take long; I only wish to ask you to lay a final hand to a work for which you have already striven?"

"What is it?"

"I wish to claim your help in the war of Texas against Mexico."

The young hunter frowned, and for some minutes remained silent.

"Will you refuse?" Tranquil asked, anxiously.

Loyal Heart shook his head.

"No," he said; "I merely feel a repugnance to mingle again with white men, and—shall I confess it? to fight against my countrymen."

"Your countrymen?"

"Yes, I am a Mexican, a native of Sonora."

"Oh!" the hunter said with an air of disappointment.

"Listen to me," Loyal Heart said, resolutely; "after all, it is better I should speak frankly to you."

"Good! speak, my friend."

"You have, I think, been several times surprised at seeing a white man, like myself, dwelling with his mother and an old servant among an Indian tribe? This appeared to you extraordinary. Well, my friend, the cause of my exile to these remote regions was a crime I committed; on the self-same day I became an incendiary and an assassin."

"Oh!" exclaimed Tranquil, "you an incendiary and assassin! it is simply impossible."

"I was not Loyal Heart then," the hunter continued with a melancholy smile; "but it is true that I was only a lad, just sixteen years of age. My father was a Spaniard of the old race, with whom honour was a sacred inheritance, which he ever kept intact. He succeeded in saving me from the hands of the juez de letras, but my crime was evident, the proofs overwhelming, and my father himself uttered my sentence in a firm voice: I was condemned to death."

"To death?" his hearers exclaimed.

"To death!" Loyal Heart repeated. "The sentence was just. Neither the supplications of his servants, nor the tears nor entreaties of my mother, succeeded in obtaining a commutation of my punishment. My father was inexorable, his resolution was formed, and he immediately proceeded to execute the sentence. The death my father reserved for me was not that vulgar death, whose sufferings endure a few seconds; no, he had said that he had determined to punish me, and designed a long and cruel agony for me. Tearing me from the arms of my mother, who was half fainting with grief, he threw me across his saddle-bow, and started at a gallop in the direction of the desert

"It was a long journey. At length it was over; my father dismounted, took me in his arms, and threw me on the ground. My father regarded me for a moment with an indefinable expression, and then spoke.

"See," he said to me in a quick voice, 'you are here more than twenty leagues from my hacienda, in which you will never set foot again, under penalty of death. From this moment you are alone—you have neither father, mother, nor family. As you are a wild beast, I condemn you to live with the wild beasts. My resolution is irrevocable, do not implore me to alter my decision.'

"I do not implore you," I replied; 'we do not offer entreaties to a hangman.'

"At this insulting outrage, my father started; but immediately continued:

"In this bag," he said, pointing to a rather large pouch thrown down by my side, 'are provisions for two days; I leave you this rifle, which in my hands never missed its mark; I give you also these pistols, this machete, knife, and axe, and gunpowder and bullets in these buffalo-horns; all is finished between us on this earth; you are left alone and without family; you have a second existence to begin, and to provide for your wants.'

"After uttering these words coldly and distinctly, to which I listened with deep attention, my father cut with his knife the bonds that held my limbs captive, and leaping into the saddle, started at a gallop without once turning his head. I felt a furious grief wither my heart; my courage all at once abandoned me, and I was afraid; then, clasping my hands with an effort, I exclaimed twice in a choking voice:

"Oh, my mother—my mother!"

"Succumbing to terror and despair, I fainted."

There was a moment's silence. These men, though accustomed to the affecting incidents of their rough life, felt moved to pity at this simple and yet so striking recital. The hunter's mother and his old servant had silently joined the hearers, while the dogs, lying at his feet, licked his hands. The young man had let his head sink on his chest, and hid his face in his hands, for he was suffering from terrible emotion. No one dared to risk a word of consolation, and a mournful silence prevailed in the rancho; at length Loyal Heart raised his head again.

"How long I remained unconscious," he continued, "I never knew; a feeling of coolness I suddenly experienced made me open my eyes; the abundant morning dew, by inundating my face, had recalled me to life. My first care was to collect some dry branches, and light a fire to warm me.

"When a great suffering does not kill on the spot, a reaction immediately takes place: courage and will resume their empire, and the heart is strengthened. In a few moments I regarded my position as less desperate. I was alone in the desert, it was true; but though still very young, as I was hardly sixteen, I was tall and strong, gifted with a firm character like my father, extremely tenacious in my ideas and will; I had weapons, ammunition, and provisions, and my position was, therefore, far from being desperate. For a moment I had the thought of returning to the hacienda, and throwing myself at my father's knees; but I knew his inflexible character. My pride revolted, and I repulsed this thought, which was, perhaps, a divine inspiration.

"Still, being slightly comforted by the reflections I had just made, and crushed by the poignant emotions of the last few hours, I at length yielded to sleep, that imperious need of lads of my age, and fell off, after throwing wood on the fire to make it last as long as possible.

"When I awoke, this desert, which seemed to me so gloomy and desolate in the darkness, assumed an enchanting aspect in the dazzling sunbeams; the night had taken with it all its gloomy fancies. The morning breeze, and the sharp odours exhaled from the ground inflated my chest, and made me feel wondrously comforted;

I fell on my knees, and with eyes and hands raised to heaven, offered up an ardent prayer.

"I felt stronger, and rose with an infinite sense of confidence and hope in the future, for I was young and strong. After making a light meal, I put my weapons in my belt, threw my bag on one shoulder, my rifle on the other, and, after looking back for the last time with a sigh of regret, I set out, murmuring the name of my mother.

"My first march was long, for I proceeded toward a forest which I saw glistening in the horizon, and wished to reach before sunset. Nothing hurried me, but I wished at once to discover my strength, and know of what I was capable. Two hours before nightfall I reached the forest, and was soon lost in the ocean of the verdure.

"My father's tigrero, an old wood-ranger, who had left his footmarks in every American desert, had told me during the long hunting-nights we have spent together, many of his adventures on the prairies, thus giving me, though neither of us suspected it at the time, lessons which the moment had now arrived for me to profit by.

"I formed my bivouac on the top of a hill, lit a large fire, and after supping with good appetite, said my prayer, and fell asleep. All at once I woke up with a start; two rastreros were licking my hands with whines of joy, while my mother and my old Eusebio were bending over and carefully examining me.

"'Heaven be praised!' my mother exclaimed, 'he is not dead.'

"I could not express the happiness that suddenly flooded my soul at the sight of my mother. I gave way to a feeling of immense joy; when our transports were somewhat calmed, my mother said to me—

"'And now, what do you intend doing? We shall return to the hacienda, shall we not? Oh, if you but knew how I suffered through your absence!'

"'Return to the hacienda?' I repeated.

"'Yes; your father, I am certain, will pardon you, if he has not done so already in his heart.' And while saying this, my mother looked at me anxiously.

"I remained silent.

"'Why do you not answer me, my child?' she said to me.

"I made a violent effort over myself. 'Mother,' I at length answered, 'the mere thought of a separation fills my heart with sorrow and bitterness. But before I inform you of my resolution, answer me frankly one thing.'

"'Speak, my child.'

"'Has my father sent you to me?'

"'No,' she answered, sorrowfully.

"'But, at any rate, you believe that he approves the step you are now taking?'

"'I do not believe it,' she said, with even greater sorrow than before.

"'Well, my mother,' I answered, 'God will judge me. My father has denied me, he has abandoned me in the desert. I no longer exist for him, as he himself told me—and I am dead to all the world. I will never set foot in the hacienda again, unless I am able to forgive myself. A new existence commences for me from to-day. Heaven's will be done—my resolution is immovable.'

"My mother looked at me fixedly for a moment; she knew that once I had categorically expressed my will, I never recalled my words. Two tears silently coursed down her pale cheeks. 'The will of God be done,' she said; 'we will remain, then, in the desert.'

"'What!' I exclaimed, with joyous surprise, 'do you consent to remain with me?'

"'Am I not thy mother?' she said, with an accent of ineffable kindness.

"It was in vain," Loyal Heart continued, "that I implored my mother to leave me to the care of Heaven, and return to the hacienda with Nô Eusebio. Her resolution was inflexible.

"'Ever since I married your father,' she said to me, 'however unjust or extraordinary his demands might be, he found in me rather a submissive slave than a wife. A complaint has never passed my lips; I have never attempted to oppose one of his wishes. But to-day the measure is full; by exiling you as he has done, coldly repulsing my prayers, and despising my tears, he has at length allowed me to read his heart, and the little egotism and cruel pride by which he allows himself to be governed. The condemnation he pronounced against you I pronounce, in my turn, against him. It is the law of retaliation, the law of the desert in which we are going henceforth to live. Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'

"Like all timid natures accustomed to bow their heads timidly beneath the yoke, my mother, when the spirit of revolt entered her heart, assumed an obstinacy at the least equal to her ordinary docility. The way in which she uttered those words proved to me that all my prayers would be useless, and that it was better to yield to her determination. I therefore observed to my mother that, as soon as my father noticed her departure, he would probably start, at the head of all his tenants, in pursuit of her, and that we should be inevitably discovered, if we did not start at once. My mother and Nô Eusebio had come on horseback, but one of the animals had foundered; she mounted the other horse, Nô Eusebio and myself following on foot, while the rastreros cleared the way.

"We knew not whither we were going, and did not trouble ourselves at all about it; plains succeeded forests, streams rivers, and we continued our forward march, hunting to support life, and camping wherever night surprised us, without regret for the past or anxiety for the future. We advanced thus straight ahead for nearly a month.

"One day—a Sunday—the march was interrupted, and we spent the day in pious conversation. About three in the afternoon, when the great heat of the day was beginning to yield, I rose and took my gun, with the intention of killing a little game, as our provisions were nearly exhausted, and I was absolutely compelled to renew them. My mother made no objection, though, as I have stated, Sundays were generally consecrated to rest: and I went off with the two rastreros. I went on for a long distance without seeing anything deserving powder and shot, and was thinking of turning back, when my two dogs, which were running on ahead, came to a halt.

"Although I was still a novice in the wood-ranger's art, I judged it necessary to act with prudence, as I did not know what enemy I might find before me. I therefore advanced step by step, watching the neighbourhood closely, and listening to the slightest noise. My uncertainty did not last long, for terrible cries soon reached my ear. I continued to advance.

"Ere long all was revealed to me; I perceived through the trees, in a spacious clearing, five or six Indian warriors, fighting with the fury of despair, against a threefold number of enemies. In spite of the numerical superiority of their foes, the warriors fought with desperate courage, not yielding an inch.

"The Indian who appeared the chief of the weaker party was a tall young man, of twenty at the most, powerfully built, who, while dealing terrible blows, did not cease exciting his men to resist to the death. Neither of the parties had fire-arms, they were fighting with axes and long-barbed lances. All at once, several men rushed simultaneously on the young chief, and, despite his desperate efforts, succeeded in throwing him down, then a hand seized his long scalp-lock, and I saw a knife raised above his head.

"I know not what I felt on seeing this, or what dizziness seized upon me, but, by a mechanical movement, I raised my rifle and fired; then, rushing in, I discharged my pistols at the men nearest me. An extraordinary thing occurred, which I was far from expecting, and certainly had not foreseen. The Indians, terrified by my three

shots, followed by my sudden apparition, believed that help was arriving to their adversaries, and began flying with that intuitive rapidity peculiar to Indians, at the first repulse they met with.

"I thus found myself alone with those I came to deliver. It was the first time I had been engaged in a fight, if such a name can be given to the share I took in the struggle, hence I felt that emotion inseparable from a first event of this nature; I neither saw nor heard anything. I was standing in the centre of the clearing like a statue, not knowing whether to advance or retire, flanked by my two bloodhounds, which had not left me, but showed their teeth with hoarse growls of anger.

"The chief I had so miraculously saved and his comrades pressed around me, and began overwhelming me with marks of respect and gratitude. I let them do so, mechanically replying as well as I could, in Spanish, to the compliments the Indians lavished on me. When a little while had elapsed, and their joy was beginning to grow more sedate, the chief made me sit down by the fire, and began questioning me in Spanish, which language he spoke clearly.

"After warmly thanking me, and repeating several times that I was a great brave, he told me that his name was Nocobotha, that is to say, the Tempest; that he belonged to the great and powerful nation of the Comanches, and was related to a renowned sachem called Black-deer. Having set out with a few warriors to chase antelopes, he had been surprised by a detachment of Apaches, the sworn enemies of his nation. The chief then asked me who I was, saying to me that he should henceforth regard me as his brother, and that he wished to conduct me to his tribe.

"Nocobotha's words suggested an idea to me; I was greatly alarmed about the existence I led, not for myself, but for my poor mother. I immediately resolved to profit by the gratitude and good-will of my new acquaintance, to obtain my mother an asylum, where, if she did not find the comfort she had lost, she would run no risk of dying of want. I therefore frankly told Nocobotha the situation I was placed in, and by what accident I had providentially arrived just in time to save his scalp.

"'Good,' said the chief, when I had ended, and squeezed my hand. 'Nocobotha is the brother of Loyal Heart. (Such was the name he gave me, and I have retained it ever since.) Loyal Heart's mother will have two sons.'

"I thanked the chief, and remarked that, if he permitted me, I would return to my mother to reassure her, and tell her all that had happened.

"'Nocobotha will accompany his brother,' he said; 'he does not wish to leave him.'

"I accepted the proposition, and we at once started to return to my encampment. We did not take long in going, for we were mounted: but on seeing me arrive with six or seven Indians, my poor mother was terribly alarmed, for she fancied me a prisoner, and menaced with the most frightful punishment. I soon succeeded, however, in reassuring her, and her terror was converted into joy on hearing the good tidings I brought her. Moreover, Nocobotha, with that graceful politeness innate in Indians, soon entirely comforted her, and managed to gain her good graces. Such, my dear Tranquil, is the manner in which I became a wood-ranger, trapper, and hunter.

"On reaching the tribe, the Indians received me as a friend, a brother. All longed to instal me into the secrets of desert life. My progress was rapid, and I was soon renowned as one of the best and bravest hunters of the tribes. In several meetings with the enemy, I had opportunities to render them service. My influence increased; and now I am not only a warrior but a sachem, respected and beloved by all. Nocobotha, that noble lad, whom his courage ever bore to the front, at length fell in an ambuscade formed by the Apaches. After an obstinate struggle, I managed to bear him home, though covered with wounds. I was myself dangerously wounded.

"In spite of the marks of friendship and sympathy the sachems did not cease to

bestow on me for the manner in which I had defended my brother, I was for a long time inconsolable at his loss.

"Now, my dear Tranquil, you know my life as well as I do myself. My kind and revered mother, honoured by the Indians, to whom she is a visible Providence, is happy, or at least seems to be so. I have completely forgotten my colour, to live the life of the red-skins, who, when my brethren spurned me, received me as a son, and their friendship has never failed me. The white trappers and hunters of these regions affect, I know not why, to regard me as their chief, and eagerly seize the opportunity to show me their respect, whenever it offers. I am therefore in a position relatively enviable; and yet, the more years slip away, the more lively does the memory of the events that brought me to the desert recur to my mind, and the more I fear never to obtain the pardon of my crimes."

He was silent. The hunters looked at each other with a mingled feeling of admiration and respect for this man, who confessed a crime which so many others would have regarded at the utmost as a peccadillo.

"By jove!" Tranquil exclaimed all at once, "Heaven will be careful not to pardon you if it has not done so long ago. Men like you are somewhat rare in the desert, comrade!"

Loyal Heart smiled gently.

"Come, my friend, now that you know me thoroughly, give me your advice frankly; whatever it may be, I promise you to follow it."

"Well, my advice is very simple; it is that you should come with us."

"But I tell you I am a Mexican."

The Canadian burst into a laugh.

"Eh, eh," he said; "I fancied you stronger than that, on my honour."

"What do you mean?"

"Hang it, it is as clear as day."

"I am convinced, my friend, that you can only offer me honourable advice, so I am listening to you with the most serious attention."

"Well, you shall judge; I shall not take long to convince you."

"I ask nothing better."

"Well, let us proceed regularly. What is Mexico?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well; is it a kingdom or an empire?"

"It is a confederation."

"Very good; that is to say, Mexico is a republic, formed of several confederated states."

"Yes," Loyal Heart said, with a smile.

"Better still; then Sonora and Texas, for instance, are free states, and able to separate from the confederation, if they think proper?"

"Ah, ah," said Loyal Heart, "I did not expect that."

"Well, you see, my friend, that the Mexico of to-day, which is neither that of Moccuzoma nor that of the Spaniards, since the first merely comprised the plateau of Mexico, and the second, under the name of New Spain, a part of central America, is only indirectly your country, since you were born neither in Mexico nor Vera Cruz, but in Sonora. Hence, if you, a Sonorian, assist the Texans, you only follow the general example, and are no traitor to your country. What have you to answer to that?"

"Nothing; save that your reasoning is specious."

"Which means that you are convinced?"

"Not the least in the world. Still, I accept your proposition, and will do what you wish."

"That is a conclusion I was far from expecting, after the beginning of your sentence."

"Because, under the Texan idea, there is another, and it is that I wish to help you in carrying out."

"Ah!" the Canadian remarked, in surprise.

Loyal Heart bent over him.

"Have you not a certain affair to settle with the White Scalper, or have you forgotten it?"

The hunter started, and warmly pressed the young man's hand.

"Thanks," he said.

At this moment Black-deer entered the rancho.

"I wish to speak with my brother," he said to Loyal Heart.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE DESERT.

THE news Black-deer brought must be very important, for, in spite of that stoicism which the Indians regard as a law, the chief's face was imprinted with the most lively anxiety. After sitting down, instead of speaking, as he had been invited to do, he remained gloomy and silent. The hunters looked at him curiously, waiting with impatience till he thought proper to explain. At length Loyal Heart resolved to address him.

"What is the matter, chief?" he asked him. "Whence comes the anxiety I see on your features? What new misfortune have you to announce?"

"An enormous misfortune," he answered, in a hollow voice; "the prisoner has escaped."

"What prisoner?"

"The son of Blue-fox."

The hunters gave a start of surprise.

"It is impossible," Loyal Heart said; "did he not surrender himself as a hostage? did he not pledge his word, which an Indian warrior never breaks?"

Black-deer looked down in embarrassment.

"Come," Loyal Heart went on, "let us be frank, chief; tell us clearly what has happened."

"The prisoner was bound and placed in the great medicine-lodge."

"What!" Loyal Heart exclaimed, in indignation; "an hostage bound and imprisoned! you are mistaken?"

"I relate things exactly as they happened, Loyal Heart."

"And who gave the order?"

"I," the chief muttered.

"The hatred you feel for Blue-fox led you astray, Black-deer; you committed a great fault in despising the word pledged by this young man; by treating him as a prisoner you gave him the right to escape."

"My young men are on his trail," the chief said, with a hateful smile.

"Your young men will not capture him, for he has fled with the feet of the gazelle."

"Is the misfortune irreparable, then?"

"Perhaps not. Listen to me: one way is left us of capturing our enemy again."

The pale hunters, my brothers, have asked my help in the war the whites are carrying on; ask of the council of the chiefs one hundred picked warriors, whom I will command, and you can accompany me; to-morrow at sunset we will set out; the Apaches are burning to take their revenge for the defeat we inflicted on them, so be assured that ere we join our brothers the pale-faces, we shall see our road barred by Blue-fox and his warriors. This is the only chance—do you accept it?"

"I do accept it, Loyal Heart; your medicine is good, it has never deceived you!" the chief said, eagerly, as he rose. "I am going to the council of the chiefs, will you accompany me?"

"What to do? it is better that the proposition should come from you, Black-deer."

"Good, I will do what my brother desires; I will return shortly."

"You see, my friend," Loyal Heart said to Tranquil when the chief had left, "that I have not delayed in fulfilling my promises; perhaps, of the hundred warriors we take with us, one half will remain on the way, but the survivors will be of great assistance to you."

"Thanks, my friend," Tranquil answered; "you know that I have faith in you."

As Loyal Heart had foreseen, the Indian warriors sent in pursuit of the prisoner returned to the village without him; they had beaten up the country in vain the whole night through, without discovering any trace of his passage. The young man had disappeared from the medicine-lodge, and it was impossible to find out what means he had employed to effect his escape.

The warriors returned completely disappointed, and thus augmented the anger of their countrymen. The moment was well selected for the request Black-deer wished to make of the council of sachems. He requested the expedition projected by Loyal Heart, not as an intervention in favour of the whites, for that was only secondary, but as an experiment he desired to attempt, not only to recapture the fugitive, but his father, who, doubtless, would be posted in ambush at a little distance from the village.

When the braves knew that an expedition was meditated, under the command of two such renowned chiefs, they eagerly offered to join the war-party, so that the chief really had a difficulty in selecting. Shortly before sunset one hundred horsemen, armed with lances, guns, axes, and knives, wearing their war mocassins, from the heels of which hung numerous coyote tails, and having round their neck their long ilchochetas, or war-whistles, made of a human thigh-bone, formed one imposing squadron, drawn up in the finest order on the village square, in front of the ark of the first man. These savage warriors, with their symbolical paint and quaint dresses, offered a strange and terrific appearance.

When the white hunters ranged themselves by their side they were greeted with shouts of joy and unanimous applause. Loyal Heart and Black-deer placed themselves at the head of the band, the oldest sachems advanced and saluted the departing warriors, and at a signal from Loyal Heart the troop defiled at a walking pace before the members of the council, and quitted the village.

At the moment when they entered the plain the sun was setting in a mass of purple and golden clouds. Once on the war-trail the detachment fell into Indian file, the deepest silence prevailed in the ranks, and they advanced rapidly in the direction of the forest. The Indians, when they start on a dangerous expedition, always throw out as flankers intelligent men, ordered to discover the enemy and protect the detachment from any surprise. These spies are changed every day, and, though afoot, they always keep a great distance ahead and on the flanks of the body they have undertaken to lead. Indian warfare in no way resembles ours; it is composed of a series of tricks and surprises, and Indians must be forced by imperious circumstances to fight in the open; attacking or resisting without a complete certainty of victory is considered by them an act of madness. War, in their sight, being

only an opportunity for acquiring plunder, they see no dishonour in flight when they have only blows to gain by resisting, reserving to themselves the right of taking a brilliant revenge whenever the chance may offer.

During the first fortnight the march of the Comanches was in no way disquieted, and the scouts, since they left the village, had discovered no human trail. Two days after the Comanches entered on Texan territory.

This apparent tranquillity greatly perturbed the two chiefs of the detachment; they fancied themselves too well acquainted with the vindictive character of the Apaches to suppose that they would let them travel thus peacefully without attempting to check them. Tranquil, too, who had long known Blue-fox, completely shared their opinion. One evening the Comanches, after making a long day's march, bivouacked on the banks of a small stream upon the top of a wooded hill which commanded the course of the river and the surrounding country. As usual, the scouts had returned with the assertion that they had discovered no sign: when supper was over, Loyal Heart himself stationed the sentries, and each prepared to enjoy, during a few hours, a repose which the fatigues of the day rendered not only agreeable, but necessary.

Still Tranquil, agitated by a secret presentiment, felt a sleeplessness, for which he could find no plausible reason, so he rose, resolved to keep awake, and take a turn in the neighbourhood. The movement he made in picking up his rifle woke Loyal Heart.

"What is the matter?" he asked at once.

"Nothing," the hunter answered; "go to sleep."

"Then why do you get up?"

"Because I cannot sleep, that's all; I shall take a walk round the camp."

These words completely aroused Loyal Heart, for Tranquil was not the man to do anything without powerful reasons.

"Come, my friend," he said to him, "there is something, tell me."

"I know nothing," the hunter answered; "but I am sad and restless; in a word, I am alarmed."

"Alarmed?" Loyal Heart said with a laugh.

"I fear a snare, and that is why I wish to make a round; I suppose I shall discover nothing, I believe and hope it; but no matter, I shall at any rate be certain that we have nothing to fear."

Loyal Heart, without saying a word, wrapped himself in his zarapé and seized his rifle.

"Let us go," he said.

"What do you mean?" the hunter asked.

"I am going with you."

"What nonsense! my undertaking is only the fancy of a sick brain; do you remain here and rest yourself."

"No, no," Loyal Heart answered with a shake of his head, "I think exactly the same as you have just told me; I also feel anxious, I know not why."

"In that case, come along; perhaps, after all, it will be the better course."

The two men quitted the bivouac. The night was fresh and light, the atmosphere extremely transparent, the sky studded with stars, the moon seemed floating in æther, and its light, combined with that of the stars, was so great, that objects were as visible as in open day. A profound calm brooded over the landscape. Suddenly the Canadian seized his friend's arms, and by a sharp and irresistible movement, drew him behind the trunk of an enormous larch tree.

"What is it?" the hunter asked eagerly.

"Look!" his comrade answered laconically.

"Oh, oh, what does that mean?" the young man muttered a moment later.

"It means that I was not mistaken, and we shall have a fight, but fortunately

this time again it will be diamond cut diamond; warn John Davis, and let him take the villains in the rear, while we face them."

"There is not a moment to be lost," Loyal Heart muttered, and he bounded toward the camp.

The two experienced hunters had noticed a thing which would certainly have been passed over by the eyes of men less habituated to Indian customs. We have said that at intervals a capricious breeze passed over the tops of the trees; this breeze blew from the south-west over the plain for a distance of some few hundred yards, and yet the same breeze ran along the tall grass, incessantly approaching the hill where the Comanches were encamped, but, extraordinary to say, it blew from the north-east, or a direction diametrically opposed to the former.

Five minutes later sixty Comanches, commanded by Tranquil and Loyal Heart, crawled like serpents down the sides of the hill, and on reaching the plain stood motionless, as if converted into statues. John Davis, with the rest of the band, turned the hill. All at once a terrible cry was heard—the Comanches rose like a legion of demons, and rushed headlong on their enemies. The latter, surprised when they hoped to surprise, hesitated for a moment, and then, terrified by this sudden attack, were seized by a panic terror; but behind them rose suddenly the American's band.

They must fight, or surrender to the mercy of an implacable foe; hence, the Apaches closed up shoulder to shoulder, and the butchery commenced.

The sun, on rising, illuminated a horrible scene of carnage; forty Comanches had fallen, while of the Apaches ten men, all more or less severely wounded, alone stood upright. Loyal Heart turned away in sorrow from this fearful sight, for it would have been useless for him to interfere to save the victims. The Comanches, furious at the resistance their enemies had offered, did not listen to his orders, and the remaining Apaches were killed and scalped.

"Ah!" Black-deer exclaimed, pointing to a mutilated corpse, "the sachems will be pleased, for Blue-fox is dead at last."

In truth, the formidable chief lay on a pile of Comanche corpses; his body was literally covered with wounds, and his son, a poor lad scarce adolescent yet, was lying at his feet. Curiously enough, for the Indians only take the scalps of their enemies usually, a fresh cut-off head was fastened to the chief's girdle—it was that of Fray Antonio. The poor monk, who had quitted the village a few days before Tranquil, had doubtless been surprised and massacred by the Apaches.

So soon as the carnage, for we cannot call it a battle, was over, the Indians prepared to pay the last rites to those of their friends who had found death in this sanguinary struggle. Deep graves were dug, and the bodies were thrown in without the usual funeral ceremonies, which circumstances prevented; still they were careful to bury their arms with them, and then stones were piled on the graves to defend them from wild beasts. As for the Apaches, they were left at the spot where they had fallen. After this, the war-party, diminished by nearly one-half, started again sadly for Texas.

The victory of the Comanches was complete, it is true, but too dearly bought for the Indians to think of rejoicing at it. The massacre of the Apaches was far from compensating them for the death of forty Comanche warriors, without counting those who, in all probability, would perish on the journey from the wounds they had received.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LAST HALT.

Now that we are approaching the last pages of our book, we cannot repress a feeling of regret on thinking of the scenes of blood and murder which, in order to be truthful, we were compelled to unfold before our readers. If this narrative had been a fable, and we had been able to arrange our subject at our pleasure, most assuredly many scenes would have been cut down and altered. Unhappily, we have been obliged to narrate facts just as they happened, although we have frequently been careful to tone down certain details whose naked truth would have scandalised the reader.

Were we to be reproached with the continual combats in which our heroes are engaged, we should reply: we describe the manners of a race which is daily diminishing in the convulsive grasp of the civilisation against which it struggles in vain; this race is called upon by the fatal decree of fate to disappear ere long eternally from the face of the globe; its manners and customs will then pass into the condition of a legend, and being preserved by tradition, will not fail to be falsified and become incomprehensible. It is, therefore, our duty, who have become the unworthy historian of this unhappy race, to make it known as it was, as it is still, for acting otherwise would have been a felonious deed on our part, of which our readers would have been justified in complaining.

Finishing this parenthesis, which is already too long, but which we believe to be not merely necessary but indispensable, we will resume our narrative at the point where we left it.

We will now lead the reader to the extreme outposts of the Mexican army. This army, six thousand strong on its entrance into Texas, now amounted to no more than fifteen hundred, including a reinforcement of five hundred men, which General Cos had just brought up. The successive victories gained by Santa Anna over the Texans had therefore cost him just five thousand men. This negative triumph caused the president of the Mexican republic considerable reflection. Unluckily, whatever Santa Anna's apprehensions might be, it was too late to withdraw, and he must try his fortune to the end.

A space of five leagues at the most separated the two belligerent armies, and that space was diminished nearly one-half by the position of their videttes. The vanguard of the Mexican army, composed of two hundred regulars, was commanded by Colonel Melendez, but a league further a-head was encamped a forlorn hope, which had to clear the way for the movements of the army. These were simply the pirates of the prairies, commanded by Sandoval, whom we saw a short time back introduce himself to the Jaguar, and make so singular a bargain with him.

In spite of the extremely slight esteem in which the Mexican army held the honesty of the said Sandoval and his myrmidons, General Santa Anna found himself constrained to place a certain amount of confidence in these thorough-paced scoundrels, owing to their incontestable capability as guides, and, above all, as flankers.

These worthy men, then, were bivouacked, as we have said, about a league in advance of the Mexican army, and as they liked to take their ease whenever the opportunity offered, they had found nothing better than quartering themselves in a pueblo, whose inhabitants had naturally fled at their approach, and the houses of which the pirates pulled down, in order to procure wood for their camp-fires. Still, either by accident or some other reason, one house, or rather hut, had escaped the general ruin, and alone remained standing.

As this house served at this moment as the abode of Dona Carmela, we will ask the reader to enter it with us. The maiden, sad and pensive, was reclining in a hammock suspended before a window, open, in spite of the heat of the day, and her eyes, red with weeping, were invariably fixed on the desolate plain, which the sun parched, and whose sand flashed like diamonds. Of what was the poor girl thinking?

Perhaps she remembered in bitterness of spirit the happy days of the Venta del Potrero, where with Tranquil and Lanzi, those two devoted hearts to protect her, all smiled upon her, and the future appeared to her so gentle and calm. Perhaps, too, she thought of the Jaguar, for whom she felt such friendship, or of Colonel Melendez, whose respectful and profound love had made her so often dream involuntarily.

But, alas! all this had now faded away; farewell to the exquisite dreams! where were Tranquil and Lanzi, the Jaguar and Colonel Melendez? She was alone, unfriended, and defenceless, in the power of a man the mere sight of whom filled her with terror. And yet, let us add, the man whom we have represented under such gloomy colours, this White Scalper, seemed to have become completely metamorphosed. The tiger had become a lamb in the presence of the maiden, he offered her the most delicate attentions, and did everything she wished—not that she ever expressed a desire, for the poor girl would not have dared to have done so, but he strove to divine what might please her, and then did it with unexampled eagerness.

The door opened, and White Scalper entered. He was still dressed in the same garb, he was still as upright, but his face no longer wore that expression of haughty and implacable ferocity which we have seen on it. A cloud of sorrow was spread over his features, and his deep sunken eyes had lost that fire which had given his glance so strange and magnetic a fixity. The maiden did not turn at the sound of the Scalper's footsteps: the latter halted, and for a long time remained motionless, waiting, doubtless, till she would notice his presence. But the girl did not stir, and hence he resolved to speak.

"Dona Carmela!" he said, in a low voice.

She made no reply, but continued to gaze out on the plain. The Scalper sighed, and then said in a louder key:

"Dona Carmela!"

"What do you want with me?" she asked.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, on perceiving her face bathed in tears, "you are weeping."

The maiden blushed, and passed her handkerchief over her face with a feverish gesture.

"What matter?" she muttered. "What do you want with me, senor? Heavens, since I am condemned to be your slave, could you not at any rate allow me the free enjoyment of this room?"

"I thought I should cause you pleasure," he said, "by announcing to you the visit of an acquaintance."

"Who cares for me?" she said with a sigh.

"Pardon me, senorita, my intention was kind. Frequently, while you sit pensively as you are doing to-day, unconnected words and names have passed your lips."

"Ah! that is true," she answered; "not only is my person captive, but you will also like to enchain my thoughts."

This sentence was uttered with such an accent of concentrated anger and bitterness, that the old man started, and a livid pallor suddenly covered his face.

"It is well, senor," the girl continued, "for the future I will be on my guard."

"I believed, I repeat," he replied, with an accent of concentrated scorn, "that I should render you happy by bringing to you Colonel Melendez."

"What!" she exclaimed, bounding up like a lioness; "what did you say, senor? what name did you pronounce?"

"That of Colonel Melendez, who is waiting your permission to enter."

The maiden gazed at him for a moment with an indescribable expression of amazement.

"Why you must love me!" she at length burst forth.

"She asks that question!" the old man murmured.

"One moment, oh, one moment; I want to know you, to understand you, and learn what I ought to think of you."

"Alas, I repeat to you, *senorita*, that I love you, love you to adoration; oh! do not feel alarmed; that love has nothing of an insulting nature: what I love in you is an extraordinary, supernatural likeness to a woman who died, alas! on the same day that when my daughter was torn from me by the Indians. The daughter I lost, whom I shall never see again, would be your age, *senorita*; such is the secret of my love for you, of my repeated attempts to seize your person."

While the old man spoke with an impassioned accent, his face was almost transfigured; it had assumed such an expression of tenderness and sorrow, that the maiden felt affected.

"Poor father!" she said to him in a gentle and pitiful voice.

"Thanks for that word," he replied in a voice choking with emotion, while his face was inundated with tears; "thanks, *senorita*, I feel less unhappy now."

Then, after a moment's silence, he wiped away his tears.

"Do you wish him to come in?" he asked softly.

She smiled: the old man rushed to the door and threw it wide open. The colonel entered and ran up to the maiden. White Scalper went out.

"At last," the colonel exclaimed joyously, "I have found you again, dear *Carmela*!"

"Alas!" she said.

"Yes," he exclaimed with animation, "I understand you, but now you have nothing more to fear; I will free you from the odious yoke that oppresses you, and tear you from your ravisher."

The maiden softly laid her hand on his arm, and shook her head with an admirable expression of melancholy.

"I am not a prisoner," she said.

"What?" he exclaimed with the utmost surprise, "did not this man carry you off?"

"I did not say that, my friend. I merely say that I am not a prisoner."

"I do not understand you," he remarked.

"Alas, I do not understand myself."

"Then, you think that if you wished to leave this house and follow me to the camp, this man would not attempt to prevent you?"

"I am convinced of it."

"Then we will start at once, *Dona Carmela*."

"No, my friend, I shall not go; I cannot follow you."

"Why, what prevents you?"

"Did I not tell you that I do not understand myself; an hour ago I would have followed you gladly, but now I cannot."

"What has happened, then, during that period?"

"Listen, *Don Juan*; I will be frank with you, I love you, as you know, and shall be happy to be your wife; but if my happiness depended on my leaving this room, I would not do it."

"Pardon me, but this is madness."

"No it is not; I cannot explain it to you, as I do not understand it myself, but I feel that if I left this place against the wishes of the man who retains me here, I should commit a bad action."

The colonel's amazement at these strange words was so great that he could not reply.

At this moment the door opened, and White Scalper appeared. His appearance was a great relief to the pair, for they were frightfully embarrassed, and the young man especially understood that this unexpected arrival would be of great help to him. There was in the demeanour and manner of the old man a dignity which Carmela had never before remarked.

"Pardon me disturbing you," he said with a kindly accent, that made his hearers start.

"Oh," he continued, pretending to be mistaken as to the impression he produced; "excuse me, colonel, for speaking in this way, but I love Dona Carmela so dearly that I love all she loves; though old men are egotistic, as you are aware, I have been busy on your behalf."

Carmela and the colonel looked their amazement. The old man smiled.

"You shall judge for yourselves," he said. "I have just heard from a scout that a reinforcement of Indians has turned our lines, and joined the enemy, among them a wood-ranger, called Tranquil."

"My father!" Carmela exclaimed, in delight.

"Yes," the Scalper said, suppressing a sigh.

"Oh, pardon me!" the maiden said, as she offered him her hand.

"Poor child! how could I feel angry with you? Must not your heart fly straight to your father?"

The colonel was utterly astounded.

"That is what I thought," the old man continued. "Senor Melendez will ask General Santa Anna's authority to go under a flag of truce to the enemy. He will see Dona Carmela's father, and, after reassuring him about her safety, if he desire that his daughter should be restored to him I will take her to him myself."

"But that is impossible!" the maiden quickly exclaimed.

"Why so?"

"Are you not my father's enemy?"

"I was the enemy of the hunter, dear child, but never your father's enemy."

"Senor," the colonel said, walking a step toward the old man, "forgive me; up to the present I have misunderstood you, or rather, did not know you; you are a man of heart."

"No," he answered; "I am a father who has lost his daughter, and who consoles himself by a sweet error; begone, colonel, so that you may return all the sooner."

"You are right," the young man said. "Farewell, Carmela, for the present."

And, without waiting for the maiden's reply, he rushed out. When the colonel joined his men again, he learned that the order for the forward march had arrived. He was obliged to obey, and defer his visit to the general for the present.

CHAPTER XXV.

SAN JACINTO.

THE news told White Scalper by the scout was true; Tranquil and his comrades, after turning the Mexican lines with that craft characteristic of the Indians, had effected their junction with the Texan army; that is to say, with the party com-

manded by the Jaguar. Unfortunately, they only found John Davis, who told them that the Jaguar had gone to make an important communication to General Houston.

If the American had spoken to Tranquil about his daughter, and given him news of her, he would have been forced to reveal the bargain proposed by the chief of the pirates, and he did not feel justified in divulging a secret of that importance which was not his own. The Canadian consequently remained ignorant of what was going on, and was far from suspecting that his daughter, the pretty Carmela, was so near him.

At sunset the Jaguar rejoined his cuadrilla. He was delighted at the arrival of the Comanches, and warmly pressed Tranquil's hand; but as the order had been given to advance by forced marches, and the enemy was at hand, the young man had no time either to tell his old friend anything.

The general had combined his movement with great cleverness, in order to draw the enemy after him by constantly refusing to fight. The Mexicans, puffed up by their early successes, and burning with the desire to crush what they called a revolt, did not require to be excited to pursue their unseizable enemy.

The retreat and pursuit continued thus for three days, when the Texans suddenly wheeled, and advanced resolutely to meet the Mexicans.

It was the twenty-first of August, 18—, a day ever memorable in the annals of Texas. The two armies were at length face to face on the plains of San Jacinto, and were commanded in person by the chiefs of their respective republics, Generals Santa Anna and Houston. The Mexicans numbered seventeen hundred well-armed, veteran soldiers; the Texans amounted to only seven hundred and eighty-three, of whom sixty-one were cavalry.

General Houston had been compelled, on the previous evening, to detach the Jaguar's cuadrilla, which the Comanches and the hunters had joined; for, contrary to Sandoval's expectations, his men had refused to ratify the bargain he had made in their names with the Jaguar. Not that they were actuated by any patriotic feeling, but because they had come across a hacienda, which seemed to offer them the prospect of splendid plunder. Hence, without caring for either party, they had shut themselves up in the hacienda, and refused to quit it, in spite of the entreaties and threats of the chief, who, seeing that they had made up their minds, at length followed their example. The Jaguar was therefore detached by the general to dislodge these dangerous visitors, and the young man obeyed, though unwillingly, for he foresaw that he should miss the battle.

General Houston gave Colonel Lamar, who was at a later date president of Texas, the command of the sixty horsemen, and resolutely prepared for action, in spite of the numerical disproportion of his forces. At sunrise the battle commenced with extreme fury. The Texans, formed in square, advanced silently, within musket-shot of the enemy.

"Boys!" General Houston suddenly shouted, as he drew his sword, "boys! REMEMBER THE ALAMO!"

A terrible fire answered him, and the Texans rushed on the enemy, who were already wavering. The battle lasted eighteen minutes! at the expiration of that time, the Mexicans were broken, and in full flight; their flags, their camp, with arms, baggage, provisions, and equipage, fell into the hands of the victors. Considering the limited number of combatants, the carnage was immense, for six hundred Mexicans, including a general and four colonels, were killed, two hundred and eighty-three wounded, and seven hundred made prisoners; only sixty men, among them being Santa Anna, succeeded in effecting their escape.

As for the Texans, owing to the impetuosity of their attack, they had only two men killed and twenty-three wounded, though six of these died afterwards—an in-

significant loss, which proves once again, the superiority of resolution over hesitation, for most of the Mexicans were killed during the rout.

The Texans slept on the field of battle. General Houston, when sending off the Jaguar against the pirates, had said to him :

"Finish with those villains speedily, and perhaps you will return in time for the battle."

These words were sufficient to give the chief of the partisans wings; still, however great his speed might be, night surprised him, when still ten leagues from the hacienda, and he was compelled to halt, for both men and horses were utterly worn out. On the morrow, at the moment when he was about to start again, he received news of the battle of the previous day, in a very singular manner.

John Davis, while prowling among the chapparal according to his wont, discovered a man hidden in the tall grass, who was trembling all over. The American, taking him naturally enough for a Mexican spy, ordered him to get up. The man then fell on his knees, *kissed his hands*, and implored him to let him go, offering him all the gold and jewels he had about him. These supplications and entreaties produced no other effect on the American than converting his suspicions into a certainty.

"Come, come," he said roughly to his prisoner, as he cocked a pistol, "enough of this folly; go on before me, or I will blow out your brains."

The sight of the weapon produced all the effect desired on the stranger, he bowed his head piteously, and followed his captor to the bivouac.

"Who the deuce have you brought us?" the Jaguar asked sharply.

"On my word," the American answered, "I do not know. He's a scamp I found in the tall grass, who looks to me precious like a spy."

"Ah, ah!" the Jaguar said with an ugly smile, "his business will soon be settled: have him shot."

The prisoner started, and his face assumed an earthy hue.

"One moment, caballeros," he exclaimed, "one moment; I am not what you suppose."

"Nonsense," the Jaguar said, "you are a Mexican."

"I am," the prisoner exclaimed, "Don Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, president of the Mexican republic."

"What!" the Jaguar exclaimed in amazement, "you are Santa Anna?"

"Alas! yes," the president answered, piteously.

"What were you doing concealed in the grass?"

"I was trying to fly."

"Then you have been defeated?"

"Oh, yes! my army is destroyed. Oh, your general is not born for common things, for he has had the glory of conquering the *Napoleon of the West*."*

At this absurd claim, especially in the mouth of such a man, his hearers, in spite of the respect due to misfortune, could not refrain from bursting into a loud and contemptuous laugh. To this manifestation the haughty Mexican was completely insensible; for, now that he was recognised, he felt sure of not being shot—he cared little for all else. The Jaguar wrote to General Houston, describing the facts, and sent off the prisoner to him, under the escort of twenty men, commanded by John Davis, to whom this honour belonged by right, as he had been the first to discover the prisoner.

"Well," the Jaguar muttered, as he looked after the escort along the road, "fortune does not favour me."

"Ingrate that you are!" Loyal Heart said to him; "to complain when the most

* The sentence is literally true, but was said by Santa Anna to Houston himself.

glorious trophy of the victory was reserved to you ; through the capture of that prisoner, the war is over, and the independence of Texas assured for ever."

"That is true," the Jaguar shouted, as he leapt with joy ; "I did not think of that. *Viva Dios!* you are right, my friend, and I thank you for having put me on the track. By Jove! I should not have thought of that without you. Come, come," he gently exclaimed, "let us be off to the hacienda, comrades! we shall deal the last blow!"

The cuadrilla started under the guidance of its chief; we will leave the adventurers to follow their road, and preceding them for a few moments, enter the hacienda.

The pirates, according to the custom of people of that stamp, had immediately made themselves at home in the hacienda, whose owner had fled on seeing the approach of war, and from which Sandoval and his men expelled the peons and servants. The pillage was immediately organised on a great scale, and they had naturally begun with the cellars, that is to say, with the French and Spanish wines and strong liquors, so that two hours after their arrival, all the villains were as full as butts, and yells and songs rose from all sides.

Naturally the White Scalper had been compelled to follow the pirates, and carry Carmela with him. In spite of the precautions taken by the old man, the maiden heard from the chambers in which she sought shelter the cries of these raging fellows which reached her, threatening and sinister as the rolling of thunder in a tempest. Sandoval had not renounced his plan of revenging himself on the man he regarded as his enemy, and the intoxication of his men seemed to him an excellent opportunity for getting rid of him.

White Scalper tried by all the means in his power to oppose this gigantic orgie, for he knew that these rough and rebellious men, very difficult to govern when sober, became utterly undisciplined so soon as intoxication got hold of them. But the pirates had already tasted the wines and spirits, and, excited by Sandoval, they only answered the Scalper's representations with murmurs and insults. The latter, wishing to spare the maiden the odious and disgusting spectacle of an orgie, hastened to return to her, and stationed himself before the door of the room that served as her refuge, resolved to smash the first pirate who attempted to approach her.

Several hours passed, and no one thought about disturbing the old man. He was beginning to hope that all would pass over quietly, when he suddenly heard a great noise, followed by yells and oaths, and a dozen pirates appeared at the entrance of the long corridor at the end of which he was standing sentry, brandishing their weapons and uttering threats. At the sight of these furious men, whom intoxication rendered deaf to all remonstrances, the old man understood that a terrible and deadly struggle was about to begin between them and him. He was alone against all, but yet he did not despair; a sinister light gleamed in his eye, his eyebrows met under the might of an implacable will; he drew himself up to his full height before the door he had sworn to defend, and in an instant became once more the ferocious and terrible demon who had so long been the terror of the Western countries.

However, the Scalper's position was not so desperate as it might appear. Foreseeing all that occurred at this moment, he had taken all the precautions in his power to save the maiden; the window of the room in which she was was only a couple of feet from the ground, and opened on the yard of the hacienda, where a ready-saddled horse was standing, in the event of flight becoming necessary. After giving Carmela, who was kneeling in the middle of the room and praying fervently, a final hint, the old man prepared to resist his aggressors.

The pirates, at the sight of this man who was awaiting them so menacingly, stopped involuntarily; the front men even took a timid glance back, as if to see

whether a chance of retreat were left them ; but the passage was interrupted by those who came behind them and thrust them on. Sandoval, who was well aware with what sort of a man his comrades would have to deal, had prudently abstained from showing himself, and remained with some of his friends in the banqueting-hall, drinking and singing.

The delay in the pirates' advance had suggested to the Scalper the idea of setting the door ajar, so that he might escape with greater facility when the moment arrived. But the period of hesitation did not last a second ; the yells burst forth again louder than before, and the bandits prepared to rush on the old man.

" Stop, or I fire ! " he shouted, in a thundering voice.

The yells were doubled, and the bandits drew nearer. Two shots were fired, and two men fell ; the Scalper discharged his rifle at the mob, then taking it by the barrel and using it like a club, he rushed on the bandits, who were startled by this sudden attack, and ere they could dream of resistance he drove them to the end of the corridor and down the stairs.

The Scalper lost no time ; bounding like a wild beast, he rushed into the room, the door of which he closed after him, took in his arms Carmela, who was lying senseless on the floor, leaped out of window, threw the girl across his saddle-bow, and, darting on the horse's back, he started across country with headlong speed.

" Viva Dios ! " Sandoval shouted, striking the table with his fist ; " shall we let him escape ? To horse ! "

" To horse ! " the bandits yelled, as they rushed to the corrals, where their horses were put up. Ten minutes later the pirates dashed off in pursuit of White Scalper.

In the meantime White Scalper was flying at full speed, without following any settled direction ; he had only one object, thought, or desire—to save Carmela. The maiden, revived by the fresh air, was sitting up in the saddle, and, with her arms clasped round the old man's body, constantly repeated, in a voice choking with emotion, while looking with terror round her—

" Fly, fly ! quicker, oh quicker ! "

And the horse redoubled its speed, and thus ran with the rapidity of the stag pursued by a pack of hounds. All at once the old man perceived a band of horsemen debouching from a hollow way just ahead of him.

" Courage, Carmela ! " he shouted ; " we are saved. "

" Go on, go on, " the maiden replied.

This band was the Jaguar's ; the young chief, in his impatience to reach the hacienda, was galloping a long distance ahead of his men. All at once he perceived the horseman coming towards him.

" Oh ! " he exclaimed, with a feeling of deep hatred ; " White Scalper. "

He at once stopped his horse, and raised his rifle.

" Stop, stop, do not fire ! in Heaven's name do not fire ! " the Canadian shouted, who was spurring his horse and coming up at full speed, followed by Loyal Heart and the main body.

But, before the hunter could reach the Jaguar, the latter, who probably had not understood him, pulled the trigger. White Scalper, struck in the middle of the chest, rolled in the sand, dragging Carmela with him.

" Ah ! " Tranquil said, in despair, addressing Loyal Heart, " the unhappy man has killed his father ! "

" Silence ! " the latter exclaimed, placing his hand on his mouth ; " silence, in Heaven's name ! "

The Scalper was not dead, however ; the Jaguar approached him, probably to finish him, but Carmela drew herself up like a lioness and repulsed him with horror.

" Back assassin ! " she shrieked.

In spite of himself the young man recoiled, astonished and confounded. Tranquill rushed toward the wounded man, while Loyal Heart took hold of the Jaguar, and speaking gently to him, led him from the spot where White Scalper was writhing in agony. The old man held the maiden's hands in his own, which were already bathed in a death-sweat.

"Carmela, poor Carmela!" he said to her, in a broken voice; "oh, Heaven! what will become of you now?"

"You will not die," the girl exclaimed, stifling her sobs.

The old man smiled sadly.

"Alas, poor child!" he had said, "I have but a few moments to live; who will protect you when I am gone?"

"I!" said the hunter, who had come up.

"You!" the wounded man, replied; "you, her father?"

"No, her friend," the hunter remarked, with a melancholy accent, and drawing from his bosom the necklace Quoniam had torn from the Scalper during the fight in Galveston Bay. James Watt, embrace your daughter; Carmela, embrace your father."

"Oh!" the wounded man exclaimed, "my heart did not deceive me, then?"

"My father, my father, bless me!" the maiden murmured, falling on her knees.

White Scalper, or Major Watt, drew himself up as if he had received an electric shock, and laid his hands on the head of the kneeling girl.

"Bless you, my child!" he said; then, after a moment of silence, he muttered, in an almost indistinct voice, "I had a son, too."

"He is dead," the hunter answered, as he looked sorrowfully at the Jaguar.

"May Heaven pardon him!" the old man muttered. And falling back, he breathed his last sigh.

"My friend," Carmela said to the hunter, "you, whom I no longer dare to call my father, what do you order me to do in presence of this corpse?"

"Live!" the Canadian answered hoarsely, as he pointed to a horseman who was coming up at full speed, "for you love and are beloved; life is scarce beginning for you, and you may still be happy."

The rider was Colonel Melendez.

Carmela let her head fall in her hands, and burst into tears.

* * * * *

During my last visit to Texas, I had the honour of being presented to Dona Carmela, then married to Colonel Melendez, who retired from the service after the battle of San Jacinto.

Tranquill lived with them, but Loyal Heart had returned to the desert. The Jaguar, after the events we have described, resumed his adventurous life, and a year had scarce elapsed ere his death was heard of. Surprised by Apache Indians, from whom he might easily have escaped, he insisted on fighting them, and was massacred by these pitiless enemies of the white race.

Did the Jaguar know that he had killed his father, or was it his despair at seeing his love despised by Carmela, that determined him to seek death?

That remained a mystery which no one was ever able to solve.

THE END.

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Shortly.

The above will be succeeded at regular intervals by the following:

Adventurers—A Story of a
Love Chase

Pearl of the Andes

Trail Hunter

Pirates of the Prairie

Trapper's Daughter

Tiger Slayer

Gold Seekers

Indian Chief

Red Track

The whole carefully Revised and Edited by PIERCE B. ST. JOHN.

NOTICE.—GUSTAVE AIMARD was the adopted son of one of the most powerful Indian tribes, with whom he lived for more than fifteen years, in the heart of the Prairies, sharing their dangers and their pleasures, and accompanying them every-where, rifle in one hand and tomahawk in the other. In turn squatter, hunter, trapper, warrior, and miser, GUSTAVE AIMARD has traversed America from the highest peaks of the Cordilleras to the ocean shores, living from hand to mouth, happy for the day, careless of the morrow. Hence it is that GUSTAVE AIMARD only describes his own life. The Indians of whom he speaks he has known—the manners he depicts are his own.

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